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Black Horse Bill, the Bandit Wrecker.

BY ROGER STARBUCK.



"WE SAVED YOU SO AS TO FIND OUT ABOUT YER CARGO," BRUTALLY REMARKED BLACK HORSE BILL. "WE HAVE NO MORE USE FOR YOU. DO FOR HIM, BOYS!"

Black Horse Bill,

THE BANDIT WRECKER;

OR,

Two Brave Boys to the Rescue.

BY ROGER STARBUCK,

AUTHOR OF "OLD TAR KNUCKLES," "THE BOY
CORAL FISHERS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BLACK HORSE BILL.

Of all those fierce, bloodthirsty brigands, who some years ago infested the American Atlantic coast, under the name of "wreckers," there was not one more daring and savage in combat, more relentless in plundering and slaying his victims, or more adroit in evading the law officers than Black Horse Bill.

This person might have been seen, one stormy September afternoon, riding along a path that led through the depths of a gloomy pine forest, about fifteen miles from the southeast coast of Virginia.

His horse, "as black as death," was large and strong with great wild eyes, full of spirit and fire. The age of his rider was not more than eighteen. Young as he was, his cheeks were covered with a brown beard and his form was well developed. He had been a blacksmith, and even now, at times, he would amuse himself at his trade in an underground dungeon or den near the coast, where he had a forge, anvil, etc., for repairing such plundered articles of hardware as were out of order. This calling had given him a wonderful breadth of shoulders and had enlarged the muscles of his chest and arms, so that he possessed unusual strength for his age. He was about five feet ten inches in height, with regular but strongly marked features, short, curly hair, and with a blended expression of daring and cruelty in his glittering black eyes. He wore heavy sea-boots. Upon his head was a sou'wester with a long lappet falling behind, and an oilskin cape drooping over his shoulders and breast, was loose enough at present to reveal a broad belt containing a knife and a pistol. Over his right shoulder was thrown a coil of rope having an iron hook attached to the end.

"Hillo! Jim Loman! Open yer door there!" he shouted, as he suddenly reined in his horse before a small building near his path.

The door not being opened soon enough to please him, he urged his horse, feet foremost, against it, dashing it inward with a loud crash.

A short, surly-looking man, with a face like that of an ape, came bounding from a back room as Bill sprung from his horse. The look of anger vanished when he saw who had done the mischief. He, however, said, reproachfully:

"Is that 'ere a good way, beatin' open a neighbor's door, Bill? Why didn't yer knock?"

"Living thunder! don't yer say a word to me 'bout it, yer yeller-skinned monkey, or I'll set fire to yer 'fernal rat-hole! Jump, now, lively, and give me a dram of yer best, and tell me the news from the coast. Any more friends comin' "

down into our jaws? They oughter, sich weather as this, seein' as the gale is toward the coast."

"Not a wreck that I've heerd on," replied the other, "but yer know news don't travel here-away like a whirlwind."

Then he leaned over and whispered something to Bill.

"Are you sure?" said the wrecker, in a low voice.

"Come and see for yerself. He's been asleep for a good two hours. Would o' plied him with the sticker (knife), but thought best to wait till I see'd you, knowin' yer'd stop here comin' back."

Bill followed the speaker into the next room, and there, on a rude bench, fast asleep, lay a fine-looking youth of sixteen, dressed in the rough garb of a common sailor. Jim, however, pointed to an opening in the coarse coat, where it had become loosened in front, and there the wrecker beheld the blue jacket, with its glittering buttons, of a young officer in the revenue service.

"Death and furies!" muttered Bill. "You have been just a little too bold, my blade, comin' to spy out what yer'll never have a chance to learn!"

"He told me he'd been to Norfolk, and that his craft—a merchant brig—was anchored off the coast. He'd traveled far, he said, and 'ud pay for a few hours' rest and 'freshments."

"He lied. He came to spy upon us. Good-by to you, my young prig!"

As he spoke, Bill drew his long, formidable knife, and, as coolly as if the slumberer had been a pig, he was about to draw the keen blade across his throat, when all at once the young sailor, who evidently had merely been feigning sleep, sprung like a flash to his feet and pointed a pistol at the head of the outlaw.

"Hello!" cried Bill, starting back, somewhat astounded. "So you were only shamming?"

"I heard all you said," coolly replied the other. "You are my prisoner."

Bill uttered a loud, disdainful laugh.

"Surrender!" cried the youth sternly, "or—"

He did not finish the sentence.

Jim Loman struck the pistol from his grasp, and pressed with his heel a sort of spike, protruding from the floor, when a concealed trap-door gave way beneath the young officer, precipitating him into a small cellar or dungeon. The trap closed again and the prisoner was in total darkness.

"Come, Jim, yer better settle him at once," said Bill. "I must see yer do it 'fore I leave this place."

"Here goes, then," and Jim pressed the spike as before, but the trap did not open.

"Fool!" cried his companion. "That is a clumsy contrivance of yours."

"It never served me so afore," was the answer. "The wire of the spring must have got out of order."

"Well, then, git a crowbar and pry open the trap. Yer can do that?"

"Yes; I'll look for the crowbar."

"Never mind; can't wait. Yer've got an ax or a hatchet?"

"Yes; but I don't keer to have my house all split to pieces, for—"

Bill, however, ran into the next apartment, obtained the ax, and commenced to hammer away at the trap. The tremendous blows he dealt indicated uncommon strength. But the trap was made of hard wood and for some time it resisted his efforts. At last the planks were shattered.

The wrecker leaned over the opening and shouted:

"Hello, down there!"

There was no reply.

"Shamming again," said Bill to his companion. "Come, bring the ladder."

"It's in the wood-shed," was the answer.

"Well, go and get it, you lazy skunk!"

The man's eyes gleamed with anger; he looked sullenly at his battered flooring.

"Come, why don't yer go?" roared Bill.

Jim no longer hesitated. He went to the wood-shed and soon returned with the ladder, which was quickly placed.

The cellar was about seven feet deep.

The proprietor took a loaded gun from the wall of the room, and advanced to the edge of the trap opening.

"Go on! take the lead!" ordered Bill. "What yer stoppin' for? Why don't yer go on?"

"He may have another pistol."

"Well, haven't you a gun?"

"Yes, but—but—he might fire *first*."

"I didn't know yer was quite sech a coward," said Bill, with the utmost contempt.

Without hesitation, he then descended the ladder, holding his pistol in one hand.

A cry of blended wrath and astonishment escaped him when he reached the bottom of the ladder.

By the dim light stealing down into the dungeon from above he discovered that the prisoner was gone!

"What's the meanin' of this?" cried Bill, glaring at Loman, who was now by his side.

"Old Nick must have had a hand in it! Ther's no way he could have got out."

The wrecker pointed to a pair of shutters in the stone foundation.

"Fastened on the outside as well as inside," declared Jim. "Yer can go and see for yerself. Besides, he couldn't have reached 'em had he tried."

The wrecker, followed by Jim, went outside and looked at the shutters, which he found securely bolted.

"It's plain some one has helped the lubber escape!" cried Bill.

"Who? Ther's no one here but me!"

"Where's Moll?"

"She's away these two weeks. Besides, my wife isn't the one to go back on yer, and yer have no bizness to say so, for—"

"Furies, man. Give me none of yer impudence, or I'll kill you!" roared Bill.

Then, entering the house, he went behind a sort of bar there and helped himself to a glass of whisky, after which, remounting his horse, he rode off.

Scarcely was he out of sight when a large, raw-boned woman of middle age emerged from behind a cask in the wood-house, where she had been concealed.

It is hardly necessary to say that it was she

who had freed the boy officer from his dungeon. Returning unexpectedly from her visit to a friend, miles away, she had overheard what passed within the house. Although not averse to aiding the wreckers, whom her husband, by a fearful oath, was pledged to serve, yet she was not bad enough to see even an enemy murdered if she could help it.

She had stolen to the wood-house, procured the ladder, brought it to the cellar foundation, and then, unfastening the shutters, had thrust it through the opening. The prisoner had thus climbed up and made his escape, after which, having rebolted the shutters, Moll had carried the ladder back to the wood-house.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOY WATCHER.

THE gale blew with redoubled violence full into the face of Black Horse Bill as he rode on.

Spurring his steed forward, he came at last in sight of a long tongue of land or sandy strip of beach projecting far into the sea.

There, looking from a distance, like the black wings of some evil bird, dark objects projected from this strip of sand.

These were the tents of the wreckers, the canvas being well tarred to protect their occupants from the rain.

Out at sea the storm raged violently, while the huge, foam-crested waves came rolling in with the din of thunder upon the beach and the numerous sand-banks, near the coast.

As Bill looked that way, his dark eyes gleamed with savage pleasure.

Upon one of the sand-banks half a mile off, a bark had lately been driven, and lay there, a complete wreck, with her topmasts gone, and the seas making a clean breach over her!

A group of wreckers, wearing sou'westers and oil-skin suits, stood near the beach, watching a man who was making frantic endeavors to reach the shore. At times, as he struggled in the foaming, boiling waters, his head would be visible; but the next moment it would disappear.

He was, however, a stout swimmer, and just as Bill rode up to the group of wreckers, he was only a few fathoms from the shore.

"Heer, one of you, go in there a little way, and throw him the end of this rope," ordered Bill, flinging the coil he had with him from his shoulders.

A man did so; the swimmer caught the end of the line, and utterly exhausted, he was hauled to the beach.

"Thank you," he gasped, reviving as a little brandy was given him.

"Your cargo, and the name of your bark?" demanded Bill, as the sailor was helped to his feet.

"The Caroline, Captain Reeves, from New Orleans. Cargo, cotton, coffee and general merchandise. I am her captain. Every soul including my son Jack has been drowned. I am the only survivor."

"Why, in the fiend's name, didn't yer stay aboard the wreck?" cried Bill.

"I was swept overboard. As to the cargo, if you will help me save it, you shall have salvage—"

"No; instead of *salvage* we go in for *savage*!" interrupted Bill, laughing.

The captain stared, but, noticing covert smiles on the grim visages about him, he seemed to guess the true character of these people.

"We saved you so as to find out about yer cargo," brutally remarked Black Horse Bill. "We have no more use for you. Do for him, boys!"

"I have a wife and children," pleaded the captain; "for their sakes—"

Before he could finish, a man struck him with a club, stretching him lifeless at his feet.

"Let him have 'funeral honors,' soon as yer can," ordered Bill, as he rode off to his tent—a larger one than the others.

Around the prostrate sailor gathered some of the wreckers like wild beasts of prey, and proceeded to rifle his pockets. One obtained his watch, another his pocketbook, and a third jerked a valuable ring from his index finger. Then they dug a hole in the sand, and one ruffian had raised an ax above the captain to make sure work, when a companion interposed.

"Wait till Bill comes back. I have somethin' to say to him 'bout this man," he cried.

"What's the use? If he ain't dead, now, he'll soon be so, after that crack with the club!"

Up to this point the movements of the wreckers had been witnessed by a person who still remained aboard the wreck. This was none other than the captain's son, Jack Reeves, whom the former had thought was drowned. He was a boy about sixteen years old—a bright-looking youth, with light, curling hair, clear complexion, blue eyes, and a broad-shouldered, vigorous form.

It was his strength and activity which had saved him from death.

A huge sea, when the vessel struck the sand-bank, had torn him from his father's side, and carried him over the bow. He had contrived to clutch the bobstay, and to this he had clung until the sea had passed him. At the same moment the foretop-mast, with all its rigging, came crashing down over the bow, and there it lay—the network of ropes and canvas hanging over him, completely screening him from sight, and preventing his reaching the deck. It was at this moment that his father was also swept over by a sea.

The boy held firmly to the bobstay, around which he had contrived to twist his legs, until it chanced that the fallen mast slipped to one side, when he was enabled to climb to the deck, where he lashed himself to the windlass to prevent his being swept overboard. He had not been seen by the wreckers, owing to the drooping canvas of the topsail and broken jib-boom, which had hung down in front of him; nor had they noticed him after he reached the deck as they were then gathered about the captain.

From his position the boy had seen the wretches knock down his parent and afterward rifle his pockets. The painful sight sent a thrill of horror through his heart, and then and there, clinching his fists, he made a solemn vow if he were saved, not to rest until he had brought the villains to justice, and thus avenged his father.

A mist now screened the wreckers from his

gaze, but he still kept himself in a crouching position.

Fortunately, the bows of the craft being lifted high on the sand-bank, the seas coming over this part of her were not so violent as those that swept her after-deck.

And at last, as darkness closed around him, the wind abated, and the seas began to subside. Jack loosened himself from the windlass, and crept along the inclined deck toward the cabin. He looked through the companionway, to hear the dull wash of the water inside, which had flooded the rooms and was half-way up the steps.

He felt faint and hungry, but he perceived at once that nothing to eat could here be obtained. He went forward again, and, getting into the fore-castle, which was only partly flooded, he felt for the "bread barge"—a box which was usually hung up between the bitts, and which was kept filled with sea-biscuits. Fortunately he found some of these which enabled him to make a meal. He then put some of the biscuits in his pockets.

Hours passed before he saw the lanterns of the wreckers' boats as they approached. Then he lowered himself from the bow upon the sand-bank, and crouched behind a billock.

Soon after, the boats came alongside the vessel, and their occupants swarmed upon the deck. By means of ropes, tackles, and other implements, many of the valuable boxes and bales were hoisted out of the watery hold. They were transferred as fast as possible to one of the boats, which was then hauled ashore by means of a rope attached to the bow—the other end of which had been left in possession of the men on the beach, who were to pull upon it. The end of another rope fast to the stern was retained by the persons aboard the wreck, and thus the boat was alternately pulled to and from the bark with its load until all that could be obtained from the vessel had been deposited on shore.

Black Horse Bill superintended the work aboard the wreck.

"There, boys!" he shouted, when the last load was taken to the beach. "We can't git any more out of the cussed craft. She'll go to pieces in an hour, the way she's bumpin' up and down."

Still keeping close behind the hillock, Jack heard the wreckers pulling off.

When they were gone he clambered back upon the wreck.

Exhausted by his late hardships, he reclined on the deck, and, ere he was aware of it, he fell asleep.

He was awakened by a crashing noise, and, springing up, he perceived that the bark was going to pieces.

She broke asunder amidships, and Jack found himself in the water. There was still a heavy sea running. The boy swam to a fragment of the wreck near him, and, lying upon it, allowed the waves to carry him on.

CHAPTER III.

A FIGHT FOR LIFE.

THE direction of the waves was now toward a part of the coast, about half a mile below the point occupied by the wreckers' tents.

Through the deep gloom Jack could see the

lights of these habitations. At last the drifting fragment struck the beach.

"Ahoy! who is that?" came a clear voice.

The boy started.

From his belt he drew his knife.

"It is one of the wreckers!" he thought. "I will strike one good blow, at least, to avenge my father!"

"Who is that?" came the hail again, and he saw the outline of a form approaching.

"It is no matter!" answered Jack, who now was on the beach. "If you offer to harm me, I will put my knife in you! You killed my father. The time will arrive when every one of you wreckers shall swing!"

"Good! I like that!" came the other voice.

"I think you and I are of one mind!"

"Who then are you?" inquired Jack.

The moon which had been hidden by heavy, black clouds, now emerged into an open space, lighting up the two forms on the beach.

Jack saw before him a dark, fine looking youth about his own age, enveloped in a shaggy sailor's coat.

"I am one who, like you, is bent on sweeping those infernal pests of wreckers from this coast!"

"So then you are not a wrecker?"

"Far from it," and partly throwing open the front of his coat, the youth revealed his naval revenue uniform.

Then he frankly held out his hand, which was cordially grasped by the other boy.

Mutual explanations followed. Jack then learned that his companion's name was Frank Watson, and that he was the son of the captain of a revenue cutter, which had been sent to cruise along the coast in search of the wreckers' haunts. Having carried away her foremast in a gale, she had gone into Norfolk for repairs. While there, Frank, wandering into the interior, had lost himself in a lonely pine forest, and, during his endeavors to find his way out, had met with his perilous adventure at Jim Loman's house, as already recorded. After his escape he had hurried off, and had finally, a few hours before the present time, struck the beach at this point.

"And here we are," he added. "Neither of us with a good weapon, only half a mile from the wreckers!"

"It's all up with us if they pounce upon us."

"Yes, and we have nothing to eat or drink."

"What shall we do?"

"We must try to reach my father's vessel. I was about to start to make the attempt, when I saw you coming. It will be a perilous undertaking. We will have to pass the wreckers' tents first!"

"We can't do that without being seen."

"We must try. It is our only course. That wretch whom they call Black Horse Bill has sent men off into the woods, probably to look for me, so that we cannot go in that direction. The surest way is to keep along the coast."

"Hark!"

The sound of voices and footsteps was heard. A lantern was carried by one of the persons approaching.

"There are only two," said Frank, significantly.

"And they have seen us!" cried Jack.

"There are but two!" repeated the other, as he drew a dagger from his belt.

"They have pistols."

"We must make the best of it. This way."

Followed by Jack, he placed himself behind a ridge of sand—the only one which, for some distance, broke the level surface of the coast. Grasping their knives, the boys saw, above the hillock, the two wreckers, pistol in hand, running toward them.

They were young men of about twenty.

"Hallo there! Who are you? Give yourselves up, or you are dead dogs!" cried one, as the two paused within a few yards of the hillock, and placing their lantern on the ground, pointed their pistols at the heads of the boys.

"Come and take us, if you want us!" cried Frank.

The man laughed hoarsely.

"That's easy done. Come on, Tom."

The two rushed toward the hillock, and got round it.

"We can handle these 'babes' without pistols," cried the fellow who had previously spoken. "Come, follow us, young-ones. We want to show you to Black Horse Bill."

"Get out, you cowardly lubbers!" retorted Jack. "You murdered my father, and for that I'll pay you off, if I die for it."

As he spoke he dashed a handful of sand he had scooped up full into the eyes of the wrecker, and then sprung at him with the bound of a tiger.

Half blinded, the man fired his pistol, but his disturbed vision caused him to miss his aim, and Jack's knife sunk to the haft in his heart.

"Well done!" cried Watson.

He dodged and knocked up the arm of the other man, who was about to fire upon him, causing the bullet to pass high over his head.

The wrecker, however, avoided the stroke of the young officer's dagger, and clinching him, hurled him down. Frank drew him to the ground with him, and the two rolled over and over in a desperate struggle.

Frank had inflicted several severe wounds upon his opponent with his dagger, when the man, disengaging himself on seeing Jack coming toward him, bounded off.

"He must not escape," cried Frank. "That will spoil a plan I have."

The wounded man could not run very fast. The boys headed him off when he was seen to make straight for the water, into which he rushed.

His pursuers dashed in after him. On reaching deep water, he struck out, but all at once a black object like the upper part of a fan, was seen cutting the surface in his direction. A moment later it vanished, and then one long, horrible cry, like the scream of a demon, escaped the swimmer. The whole half of his body shot up for an instant above the surface, with the arms upraised; then it suddenly vanished under the water, which was there stained with a crimson stream.

"He's gone!" cried Frank.

"Ay, a shark, scenting his blood, has 'done' for him," assented Jack.

"A horrid fate, but we can afford to do without him!"

"Right there! He deserved a worse fate."

The boys waded ashore.

"My plan," explained Frank, "was to put on the wrecker's suit. In that way we might have passed their tents without exciting suspicion. As it is, we'll have to divide between us the clothes of the dead one ashore—one of us taking the oilskin coat and hat, and the other putting on the pea-jacket beneath and also the sou'-wester of the fellow who was sharked; for he left his hat behind him," added Frank, pointing it out lying on the sand.

"The wreckers' clothes seem like poison to me," demurred Jack, "but of course we can't afford to be squeamish now."

"You can believe that. And now for our masquerade ball."

"Ay, ay! but we must keep a sharp lookout, or we'll get 'ball' of another kind," Jack warned.

"True, shipmate; we must try to steer clear of that."

They went to the side of the dead man, and were soon disguised as Frank had indicated. They then took the lantern, blew out the light, and moved boldly along in the direction of the wreckers' tents, keeping the capes of the sou'-westers well about the sides of their faces and the rims well down.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STRATAGEM.

THE first danger of discovery was met with when they were about a quarter of a mile from the tents.

Coming straight toward them, they beheld no less a personage than the chief of the wreckers himself—Black Horse Bill.

"Hello! where yer come from?" he cried. "Yer couldn't have made much of a 'patrol,' comin' back so soon. Anything up?"

"Footsteps in the sand, made lately, yer can be sure," said Watson, trying to imitate the gruff tones of one of the wreckers the boys had encountered.

"Footsteps—eh? Thunder! What can it mean?"

"A boy's tracks, I should say, by the size," answered Frank.

"Hello! I b'lieve it's them of that cursed young revenue chap that gave me the slip!"

"Yer may make up yer mind to that," said Watson.

"Hillo! What's the matter with yer voice! Ther's an uncommon squeak to it, diff'rent from when you and I parted last."

"I got a confounded cold goin' off to that wreck."

Bill started and stared.

"Yer've lost yer senses, Thompson! Yer didn't go to the wreck, at all!"

"I don't mean the last one."

"Oh! Well, see that yer speak plain in future," cried Bill, angrily. "Ther's nothin' makes my blood bile so as stupidity. I must git out men and my dog to track that revenue chap."

He walked away toward the tents, while the

boys also approached them, but kept as far from him as they could without arousing his suspicions.

They had nearly passed the further extremity of the group of tents, when they heard the wrecker calling to them.

"Hello! Where yer goin'?"

At the same moment a number of the occupants of the tents came out near the two lads.

They stopped, for to proceed would be to arouse suspicion.

Black Horse Bill approached.

He was about to speak to the boys, when one of the wreckers pointed seaward. The moon was again obscured, and the wind was commencing to blow another gale. About a league distant a light was seen emerging from the rack of black vapor drifting over the sea.

The light moved slowly, and seemed to gradually near the coast.

"Another wreck!" cried Bill. "But we must make sure of it. The craft will want a pilot. Take the small boat, two of yer, and go out to her. See that she's piloted *the right course*," he added, with a loud laugh. "Bring her into our jaws, so that we can 'chaw her up' fore she strikes a sand-bank."

"We'll go, captain," said Frank.

"Are yer sure she's a wreck, Captain Bill?" inquired one of the men.

"Sure! Of course I am! Don't yer see how slow she's crawlin' along?"

Followed by Jack, Frank hurried down to the sea-shore.

A number of boats, large and small, were there fastened to stout stakes. The two lads selected a small one and launched it.

"That's the sort," said Bill, who, with the others, had come to see them off. "Now away yer go, and pull a lively stroke."

The boys seized oars and pulled with might and main.

"Well done!" exclaimed Jack when they were out of hearing of the wreckers. "Here we are in possession of a good boat."

"Yes; the darkness favored us. Had we stayed with those fellows until morning, they would have been sure to discover the trick we have played them. Now the wind is in our favor, but we must go out to that craft before we try to reach Norfolk. The crew must be warned."

"Yes," assented Jack. "I could never forgive myself should I leave them to fall into the power of those brutes ashore."

It was hard work pulling up against the wind; but the boys were practiced oarsmen, and in the course of an hour they found themselves close to the craft.

They hailed her, a rope was thrown, and they were soon alongside.

They then perceived that she was a large merchant ship, which had carried away her three topmasts in the late gale, and was now under jury masts.

The captain of the vessel, a stout, bluff personage, confronted them as they sprung aboard.

"What ship is this?" inquired Frank, contriving to show his uniform.

"The Neptune, Captain Burton, and bound

from Callao for New York," was the reply. "I hope you are pilots, come to help us clear the sand-banks to leeward of us, for my cargo is valuable, consisting of \$500,000 worth of silver bars, besides miscellaneous articles. We have contrived to give the Carolina coast a wide berth, for there are wreckers there who are little better than pirates."

"You are not aware, then, that many of them have lately moved further North, and have banded themselves on the shore to leeward of you, under a rascal who is called Black Horse Bill?"

"I did not know it!" cried the captain, starting.

Frank, in a few words, went on to tell his story.

"God help us!" ejaculated the captain. "Had we not lost our masts, we could give this coast a wider berth. As it is, we may be carried ashore."

"The wind may change," said Frank.

"In my opinion," said Jack, "the wreckers will come out and board the ship whether she goes ashore or not."

"What's the trouble, papa?" came a soft, silvery voice at that moment.

"Go into the cabin, Mary," replied the captain. "I may as well tell you, however, that we are in danger from wreckers."

The girl, whose lovely face and form, lighted by the ship's lantern, showed her to be nearly fifteen, turned pale at such gloomy tidings.

"Have you no arms?" asked Jack.

"Yes, fortunately we have a few cutlasses, and a twelve-pound gun forward. My crew, all told, number thirty. I will make a hard fight of it before they capture me," he added, firmly.

"And we will help you," Jack declared.

"Yes," added Watson, "and if you let me have charge of the twelve-pounder, I promise to do good work with it."

The captain consented, and the boys took off their heavy coats to prepare for combat.

The sight of the captain's lovely daughter had inspired them with a determination not to leave the vessel as they had first intended to do, but to remain and help drive away the wreckers.

"Boats coming this way!" roared the man on the lookout.

The captain and his mates peering through the gloom, saw the outlines of several large boats approaching from the shore. They were evidently full of men, well armed.

The captain called his crew aft. They were stout fellows, and, when he told them what was expected of them, they gave a rousing cheer.

The arms were distributed.

Frank, with Jack's assistance, and that of one of the hands, soon had the twelve-pound carronade in the gangway, pointed toward the coming boats.

"Why don't you fire?" inquired the captain.

"Wait until they come a little nearer," and, carefully sighting the piece, the young sailor gave the word to fire.

A broad flash lighted the sea for an instant, showing the three boats, with their armed

crews, not twenty fathoms off, with Black Horse Bill standing in the stern-sheets of the head one.

The roar of the gun was followed by the whizzing of the shot and a crashing noise.

"Well aimed!" cried the captain, as loud cries and curses, with the splashing made by men struggling in the water, was heard.

"We'll give them some more. Nothing like artillery!" cried Frank, as he reloaded.

Bang! soon went the gun again, and wild cries of rage denoted that some of the wreckers were either killed or wounded.

The voice of Bill was heard booming over the waters.

"If yer don't 'bag' yer cussed gun, it'll be the worse for yu!"

The boats were now so close under the lee bow that the gun could not be depressed enough to hit them.

By the light of the ship's lantern, the head boat was seen crowded with the wreckers, who had been picked up from the one which had been destroyed. In the bow stood Black Horse Bill, his whole face dark with rage, his eyes flashing fire under his bent brows. In one hand he held a pistol, in his belt were a long knife and a cutlass.

"I'll strip yer cussed craft of everything aboard of her!" he howled. "I'll then tie every man of yer crew up, and make a burnin' coffin for him out of yer ship!"

"We'll see about that!" and Jack sprung to the wheel. "Hard up—hard!" he cried to the helmsman.

"Ay, up with the wheel!" ordered the captain, comprehending the boy's intention.

The wheel was raised, and, hurled forward by a sea, the heavy bows of the ship crashed against the loaded boat, actually cutting it in two!

Black Horse Bill was seen to reel and fall over into the water, which also closed over his companions!

Then, as the ship dashed on over the struggling, drowning wreckers, the remaining boat was dimly seen pulling to their rescue.

CHAPTER V.

THE SCHOONER.

THE captain of the ship warmly thanked Jack and Watson for their assistance.

The violence of the gale by this time prevented the firing of any more shots, and every effort was now necessary to prevent the vessel's drifting on some one of the perilous sand-banks in the vicinity.

Meanwhile, Mary, the captain's daughter, procured refreshments for the two boys, who were by this time half-famished. They also obtained a few hours' sleep.

The wind had changed a little, so that the ship could be kept along parallel with the coast.

But at dawn, when Jack and Watson awoke, they discovered that it had again changed, so that it was blowing dead ahead. The boat in which the boys had come had been shattered to pieces by a heavy sea, and only the ship's long-boat now remained aboard.

To prevent the craft from going ashore, the

captain was finally obliged to anchor in a bay on the coast, partly sheltered by sandy headlands.

"How far do you think we are from the wreckers' tents?" inquired the captain of Frank.

"About five miles. I'd advise you to get out of this as soon as you can, or the rascals will be upon you again with reinforcements. Meanwhile Jack and I will keep on our way, so as to try and bring assistance to you. We cannot be more than thirty miles from Norfolk."

Soon after the two boys started. They had walked along the shore about ten miles when they came to a sort of hut made out of the wreck.

There was an old fisherman there mending nets.

"Can you give us a drink of water?" inquired Jack.

"Yes; come in, come in," said the old man, cordially.

They entered, and their host went into another room. He appeared soon after with two cups of water.

"The water has a queer taste; it must be a little brackish," whispered Jack to his companion after they had drank.

Immediately after they were seized with a fit of drowsiness, which made them stagger.

"Sit down if you are tired," said the old man, pointing to a dilapidated lounge.

The boys sat, or rather reclined, on the lounge, where they at once fell into a deep sleep.

The fisherman took an ax from the wall and advanced toward them.

"Black Horse Bill will reward me for killing the young wretches," he muttered.

In fact, the wreckers had their friends all along the coast nearly as far as Norfolk. Soon after his baffled attempt to board the merchant-ship, Bill, who, with most of the occupants of the stoven boat, had been rescued by the crew of the other one, had dashed along the beach as swift as a whirlwind on his black horse, and notified these friends of what had taken place, bidding them keep a sharp lookout for the ship, as well as for the two boys, who, he had learned before this, had played him the ruse which has been described.

The fisherman in whose hut the boys lay asleep was a cruel, blood-thirsty rascal, who had once been a pirate, and he therefore had no more hesitation in killing the lads than if they had been two pigs.

Already his ax was raised above Frank's head, and it would the next moment have crashed through his skull had not some one suddenly pushed it aside.

"Father, what is this?" came a voice, and turning he saw his daughter Bella, a tall, masculine-looking young woman, who could handle an oar and fish as well as her parent.

"Fool! Why stop me? Twenty dollars are not to be thrown away! Besides, ain't yer the promised wife of Black Horse Bill, and is this the way yer'd spile his plans?"

"I don't like bloodshed," answered Bella, frowning. "What makes the boys sleep so?"

"I've drugged 'em."

"Yer've gone far enough, then. Leave the rest to Bill."

"But what's to be done with the boys, then?"

"When they wake let 'em go. Some one else will captur' 'em. It don't matter so long as it ain't my own father."

"No, thank you. I ain't goin' to lose my twenty dollars that way. I'll lock 'em in here, and send word to Bill by Tom Willing."

He got Bella outside of the hut, which he then locked securely. Tom Willing, a youth who sometimes helped him pull his boat, was sent to inform the wreckers of the capture.

In about two hours the boys awoke, one after the other.

They were at first bewildered, but they soon recalled past events.

They went to the door and tried to open it. It was a heavy one and resisted all their efforts.

"We are caught!" cried Frank.

"Stop yer racket there, or I'll brain you!" cried the old fisherman, outside. "Black Horse Bill and his men will soon be here to settle yer hash."

Watson's gaze fell on a small cooking-stove, in which there was a fire.

"Jack," said he, "we must get out of this before the wreckers come. Our only way is to set fire to the hut."

"We'll be burned to death."

"We may not. There's a chance for us."

He took a shovelful of hot coals from the stove and threw them down by one side of the hut.

Smoke and flame soon burst forth.

The fisherman, alarmed for his house, rushed to open the door.

Frank had procured another shovelful of hot coals. As the man, with upraised ax, rushed toward the boys, the youth flung the hot coals into his face and dealt him a stunning blow on the side of the head with the shovel.

Snatching the ax from his hand as he reeled over, Watson, followed by Jack, sprung through the doorway. No one but Bella was outside, and she made no opposition to their progress.

They hurried toward the pine woods, in the distance.

Not until they reached a thickly wooded valley did they pause for rest. They then sat down in the small hollow of a rock, which was thickly screened with shrubbery.

"Hark!" said Jack.

The baying of a hound, blended with the trampling of a horse's hoofs, was heard.

"The wreckers and their dog, headed by Black Horse Bill, are after us!" said Frank.

As he spoke, a rushing noise was heard. The head of a huge bloodhound, with glaring eyes and sharp fangs, was thrust through the leafy screen, in front of the boys.

Up went Watson's ax, and down it came, cleaving the dog's skull in twain.

The boys drew the dead body of the animal into the hollow that it might not be seen.

They heard a horse go past their retreat.

"This way, men!" came the voice of Black Horse Bill. "They can't be far off. Look sharp!"

Several voices were heard in the valley.

Two of the wreckers came near the hollow. They had long pikes, with which they probed the shrubbery. The boys saw the points of these pikes enter the hollow, and they had to dodge to prevent them from piercing their flesh. One of the pikes penetrated the body of the dog.

"Hello! here's something!" cried the man who had this weapon.

The boys crouched closely in the shadow of a dark alcove, as the dog's body was drawn forth.

There was an exclamation from both men.

"The young rascals must be here!" said one.

The two peered into the hollow, but they did not see Jack and his companion crouching in the shadow.

"They've *been* here—that's sartin," cried the first speaker.

To the great relief of the boys, the two then moved off.

When the men's voices had died away in the distance, the young sailors left their hiding-place.

They hurried along, making good progress. They had proceeded about ten miles, when they saw, through an opening in the shrubbery, a small village on the sea-shore.

Off this village was a schooner, which was preparing to get under way.

"We will go to that village and try to get something to eat," said Frank.

"May not the people there be the wreckers' friends?" said Jack.

"They can't *all* be," said Frank. "We'd better find out where that schooner is bound to."

They soon reached the village, which was merely a collection of small huts, mostly inhabited by fisherman.

They noticed, or *thought* they did, that some of these men directed a scowling glance at Frank's uniform.

"Where's this schooner bound to?" inquired the youth of a stout, broad-shouldered man, who had just come off, in a small boat, from the vessel.

The man looked closely at his interrogator before he replied:

"For Norfolk."

"Good!" said Watson. "what'll you take to give us a passage there?"

"Five dollars," was the gruff response.

"All right," said the boy. "Come on, Jack!"

The two entered the boat, which, as soon as the captain had taken in a box, brought by one of the fishermen, was pulled for the schooner.

Jack eyed the box sharply. He recognized it as one which had been aboard his father's lost vessel—the *Caroline*.

CHAPTER VI. TREACHERY.

JACK'S suspicions were aroused at sight of the box, and he whispered about it to his friend.

"Where did you get that box?" Watson boldly inquired of the captain.

"I don't know as it's any o' yer bizness," gruffly answered the skipper, "but I don't mind tellin' yer it was picked up ashore, most probable drifted from some wreck."

This set the boys' minds at ease.

"Lucky the wreckers don't know you have it, or they might try to get it away from you," said Jack.

"Wreckers? wreckers?" said the captain, in a puzzled, absent way. "Yes, I b'lieve there's some away down the coast, but the raskils never interfere with the village as its too near Norfolk—only 'bout thirty mile."

This reassured the boys still more. The boat was soon alongside, and they boarded the schooner.

In the cabin the captain gave them some hot coffee, some freshly baked biscuits, and a few slices of meat. The attention of the two was attracted by a rack, on one side, in which was a good array of cutlasses, boarding-pikes and pistols.

"We have to go armed hereabouts on account of them wrackers yer spoke of," remarked the skipper. "Besides these things, we've a ten-pound carronade, forward."

"How big a crew have you?" queried Watson.

"A dozen or so," was the reply.

Their meal being finished, the boys went on deck.

The schooner under full sail, was heading away from, instead of toward Norfolk!

"I don't like this," said Jack.

"What's that yer don't like?" inquired the captain, at his elbow.

"Why are you heading *away* from Norfolk?"

"None o' yer bizness," was the stern reply.

"You'll l'arn soon enough."

Rough hands suddenly hurled the boys down, and their arms and legs were bound with ropes. No response was made to the angry questions of the two. They were dropped into the hold, upon some coils of rope, after which the hatch was fastened over them.

"Caught again!" said Jack. "I thought we'd be if we went to that village. This captain must be in league with the wreckers."

"Right there!" came the gruff voice of the captain, as he appeared before them, lantern in hand. "We help Black Horse Bill, and he helps us. Still we are not under oath to 'em like many of t'others. There's been a reward offered for yer, dead or alive. Let's see how much you have."

He rifled the boys pockets and obtained about ten dollars.

"You mean to give us up to Black Horse Bill?" said Frank.

"That's about it. Twenty dollars ain't to be throwed away."

"If you land us where we can reach Norfolk, I will send you double that amount," said Frank.

"Gammon! Still I may talk it over with my mate."

The result evidently was not favorable. Hours passed after the captain went away, and he did not reappear.

Meanwhile the prisoners were not idle. Frank contrived to get the cords about his wrists against the broken blade of a saw, and thus he freed his arms. The rest was easy—both boys were soon on their feet.

"Fortunately we have clothes to spare," said Frank.

He took a couple of rolls of canvas, and soon rigged them, by putting on the wrecker's coats he and Jack had worn. In a dim light, these two forms stretched out might have been taken for the boys, lying extended on the rigging.

The lads concealed themselves behind a cask, near the door in the bulkhead, through which the captain had entered, and which was now locked on the other side.

Soon after the captain opened the door and reappeared, lantern in hand.

"No use. My mate and I think we'd better hold on to you," he said.

"Now," whispered Frank.

The boys glided through the open doorway, and entered the cabin.

Through the cabin window they could see the coast, not two miles off.

Frank went to the rack, and took therefrom two loaded pistols, one of which he passed to his companion.

"These come in good," said Jack.

"Yes, you can believe that. We'll have to make a rush on deck. The window is too small to crawl through."

Watson glided up the steps, peered through the companionway, and then made a sign to his companion.

"All the men, except the one at the wheel, are forward," he whispered. "Now for a rush and a spring overboard!"

There was no time to lose.

A yell from the captain indicated that he had discovered the boys' ruse.

The two put their pistols in their sou'-westers to keep them dry, and then bounded on deck. Before the helmsman could give the alarm, they lowered themselves into the sea.

The schooner was standing along under full sail, but she was not forty fathoms from the swimmers, when a boat was down, full of men, in pursuit of them.

Unfortunately wind and sea were against them. They struggled manfully, but the boat gained. They were still ten fathoms from the shore when a pistol was pointed toward them by the officer in the boat's bow.

"No use!" he shouted. "May as well give yerselves up! Stop at once, or I'll put a bullet in each of yer heads!"

The boys stopped swimming. They saw they must be captured ere they could reach the shore.

They were soon dragged into the boat.

On being taken aboard the schooner they were bound with stout cords to the windlass.

"See if yer'll git away from us ag'in, yer young lubbers!" said the captain.

The schooner was headed on her course. About a mile distant, the boys beheld the disabled merchant-ship, Neptune.

"I see! they are going to head her off," said Jack.

"Yes; and I'm afraid they'll get her in their clutches, this time."

The schooner's men, numbering about forty, were already arming themselves.

Suddenly the captain was seen pointing his glass to leeward, where there was another sail.

Then he conversed in a low voice with his

mate, after which the men were all ordered to go into the cabin and disarm themselves.

"Do you know what that means?" whispered Watson to his friend. "It means that the stranger they've sighted to leeward is a man-o'-war, and so they're afraid to attack the merchantman. They'll put it off till the war craft is out of sight and hearing. Now that they're all below, I have a plan."

This plan he hastily revealed to Jack, who approved it.

The boys' arms had been left free, but the cords holding them to the windlass were fastened with a seaman's skill, so that the knots could not be reached by the prisoners to be untied.

Frank pulled off his sou'-wester, and quickly taking therefrom the loaded pistol he had put there, he pointed it at the head of a boy, who stood a few feet from him on the lookout. The man at the wheel, being screened by the cabin-house, could not see this movement.

"Now, youngster," said Watson, in a low, stern voice, "unfasten these ropes from us at once, or we'll shoot you dead! If you make the least noise, or give an alarm, I'll fire!"

The person he addressed was about fourteen—a thin, overworked lad.

"Yer won't tell 'em I did it?" he gasped.

"No."

Without another word the boy unfastened their lashings.

The two friends then bounded aft, and while Jack pointed his pistol at the head of the man at the wheel, threatening to blow out his brains if he made the least resistance, Watson quickly fastened with its bar and padlock the slide of the companionway.

He also securely fastened the main-hatch and the fore-castle scuttle, thus shutting in the men and officers below.

The helmsman and the boy who had freed the two were still on deck.

The lads ordered the former to keep the schooner off—a command which he sullenly obeyed at the point of the pistol. Then they forced the boy to help them trim the sails, so that they now headed for the merchant-ship.

Meanwhile, the people below were vainly endeavoring to beat down the slide to get on deck.

"They'll contrive to get out at us, before long," said Jack.

"Yes; but before they do, I hope to have some of those stout fellows from the merchant craft aboard of us, after which we'll head up for the man-o'-war."

"Yer infernal young rats! let us out, or it'll be the worse for yer!" shouted the captain, behind the door.

"Take your time—no hurry," replied Watson coolly.

With Jack's assistance, he then drew the ten-pound carronade in front of the door, and pointed it toward it.

"Stop your racket!" he shouted. "You may succeed in beating down the door, but it will be at the cost of your lives! I have your carronade pointed toward you, and I'll fire and blow you to pieces the moment you open that door!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOYS' FATE.

THE determined voice of the youth was not without its effect.

The pounding at the door was stopped—at least for the present.

The schooner drew nearer to the merchant craft every moment.

Suddenly, Frank uttered a cry of dismay. An active figure had sprung upon the poop, speaking-trumpet in hand, and the boy had recognized Black Horse Bill!

Yes, there he stood, grim and stern, waiting to speak the schooner.

There could no longer be a doubt as to what had taken place. Bill and his gang had attacked the ship in the bay, and succeeded in capturing her. If so, what had become of her crew and of the captain's daughter? That they had all been slaughtered was the opinion of both boys.

"Schooner ahoy!" shouted Bill.

Frank had put on a rough pea-jacket he had seen hanging on the rail, to conceal his uniform. Night was approaching, and in the dim light, the deck of neither craft could be plainly seen.

"Halloa!" responded the youth, disguising his voice.

"Is that you, Captain Bunker?"

"Ay, ay."

"I sent word fer yer to come out and head off this craft, but it ain't necessary, now, seein' as I've got possession."

"How did yer do it?"

"Saw her in a bay below, and went out and attacked her as she was steering off with her cable cut."

"What did yer do with her crew?" inquired Frank, now scarcely able to steady his voice.

"Killed half a dozen. Got t'others below, under hatches. There's a gal there too. Goin' to burn the ship and her cussed people when I git off her cargo, but ther's a man-o'-war creepin' about here, and I'm playin' 'possum, jest now, till she gits out o' sight, when I mean to beach the old craft."

Before Frank could say another word, the wind, which had freshened to a gale, drove the two vessels far apart.

The schooner's fore and maintopmasts came down with a crash, under their heavy press of canvas.

Jack and Watson sprung aside in time to escape the falling spars, which fell slantingly across the after-deck, but the man at the wheel was struck on the head by one of the heavy yards, and his skull was crushed.

"Take the wheel!" said Watson to the boy.

The latter obeyed, and with axes, Jack and his companion soon cleared away the wreck.

With quivering timbers and the white water hissing about both rails, the schooner was now spinning along almost on her beam-ends. Darkness was all around her until, suddenly, the boys saw bright lights gleaming ahead through the rack, and discerned the outline of a huge, black object, towering in the gloom.

"The man-o'-war!" shouted Jack. "Hard up! or we'll be afoul of her!"

The boy at the wheel promptly put up the helm, and the schooner shot past the war vessel, just grazing her stern.

Frank saw an officer standing, trumpet in hand on the horse-block.

Seizing the schooner's speaking-trumpet, he shouted with all his might:

"Please send help aboard as soon as you can! The wreckers—"

But the vessels were now too far asunder for his words to be made out. The officer on the horse-block held his head in a listening attitude. It was evident he had not heard a word.

Meanwhile the people behind the cabin door were banging at it louder than ever, for they knew that the carronade had slid to leeward, broken the rail and gone overboard.

The boy at the wheel had screamed out that such was the case, on purpose that they might hear him.

Fifteen minutes after Frank had tried to speak the man-o'-war, the officers and men of the schooner came thronging out of the cabin, having broken down the door with axes.

"Where are they?—the cussed young rats," yelled the captain, flourishing his ax, and followed by his mates, armed with muskets. "The've settled the'r fate! Down with 'em! Shoot 'em down! I'll not be bothered with 'em any longer!"

Toward the boys, who stood with their backs to the rail rushed the enraged gang, and the two friends had made up their minds that their time was come, when there was a crash as if a hundred thunderbolts had stricken the schooner!

For a moment she seemed to stand still; then all her timbers fell apart, as if riven asunder by a wedge, and the lads found themselves struggling in the water.

Both, as shown, were good swimmers, and they now struck out for the point of sandy shore off which the vessel had run aground and gone to pieces.

They could see the faint outline of the land, about ten fathoms ahead of them. The foaming, tumbling waters, with the flying spray, nearly suffocated them, but they gained the beach, at last.

As they sunk exhausted on the sand, about a dozen of the schooner's crew, who had also saved themselves, came ashore.

"We must give those fellows a wide berth," assumed Frank to his companion. "They have not seen us yet, in the darkness, because we are lying in a sort of hollow. We must try to creep off."

They moved cautiously along until they were some distance from their foes.

"Have you any idea where we are?" inquired Jack.

"No, but I should think, by the course of the schooner before she struck, that we must be somewhere near Currituck Inlet, a little south of where the wreckers are."

"I see a light, far ahead. It probably comes from some fisher's hut."

"I think we've had enough of fishers' huts," decided Frank. "However, I believe the people are honest, off this part of the North Carolina coast."

They moved toward the light, and were only a few yards from it, when they discovered that it came from one of the wreckers' black tents!

Before they could retreat, a gruff voice called

out. "Who is there?" followed by the appearance of several men from the tent—one having a lantern.

The light fell full upon Watson's uniform, and, in a moment, the two boys were surrounded by half a dozen fierce fellows, flourishing knives.

"Down with 'em! cut 'em to pieces," cried one, "they are the two young lubbers that fooled us!"

"No; we must wait till Black Horse Bill comes. He may have some questions to put to 'em!" cried another.

The boys were dragged into the tent, and their hands and feet were tied with ropes.

Ten minutes later the people of the schooner who had saved themselves also appeared, and were at once recognized as friends by the wreckers.

On seeing the boys, they at once gave an account of how they had been duped by the two, and shut up in the cabin.

Before dawn, Black Horse Bill, who had been sent for, came into the tent.

"Ho! ho! my bold youngers—so yer've been caught, at last!" he cried to the boys. "Yer've been right smart you have, but you've put yer necks in the halter now!"

"If you harm us, the halter will be your fate!" declared Watson.

"Who's to know about it?" cried the outlaw. "Not a soul! I'll tie you up, and shoot yer both down like two pigs, and ther's an end of it. We must work sharp, boys," he added to his men. "I've got the merchant-craft anchored in the bay, ready for plunderin', and hard work I had to git her there in the gale. Fetch out the young lubbers, tie 'em to the stakes and three of yer can have a shot at 'em. The one that hits first will git ten dollars from me."

The wreckers cheered. This barbarous sport of making targets of his human victims was often practiced by Black Horse Bill.

As the boys were led forth, the old fisherman, from whose hut they had escaped, was seen approaching, with his daughter, Bella.

They had come to see the vessel, which they had heard the wrecker chief had succeeded in capturing. Bill told them all about it, and also about the boys.

"You should have good shots to fire at 'em," said Bella. "Better kill quick if you must kill!"

"I'll see to that. Tom Crank, Will Saunders, and Ben Broke, are the ones I'll choose soon as they wake. You shall see the sport."

"Thank you," said Bella. "But I'll go in this tent, and rest awhile, first."

She and her father entered the tent which was occupied by the three men who were to fire at the boys. These men now lay so sound asleep that the entrance of the intruders did not awaken them.

A darkened lantern here shed a dim light, revealing the three loaded pistols belonging to the trio, lying on a small bench.

"Oh, father, won't you go and ask Bill when the shooting is to commence," said Bella, "as I want to be there."

The fisherman hastened out of the tent. He returned ten minutes later.

"In a quarter of an hour from now," was his report.

"All right, I'll be there," said Bella.

Soon after, Black Horse Bill entered. He awoke the three men, and told them what he wanted them to do.

The ruffians seemed well pleased. They picked up their pistols, and the party, Bella and her father included, soon reached the selected ground.

Side by side stood the boys—each tied by a rope a fathom long to a stake, in the sand. A lantern near them lighted their forms and faces, and the many wreckers who were present could not repress a gruff cry of admiration at the firmness with which the two awaited their fate.

As Bill measured off the distance—forty paces—Bella went up close to the prisoners, and said something to them, in a low voice.

She posted herself about ten feet on their right. At the same moment the voice of Black Horse Bill was heard.

"Fire!"

Tom Crank, the first to shoot, took aim. As the sharp report of his weapon rung out, Frank's head drooped, and he fell flat upon the sand!

The wreckers, and some of the schooner's men, who were also present, gave a yell of joy.

Ben Broke was the next to fire. As his pistol rung, Jack fell heavily by the side of his companion!

"Well done—only you was a little too quick! The sport wasn't long enough!" shouted Black Horse Bill.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING VISION.

THE wreckers came and looked down upon the two boys, who lay motionless.

"Dig a hole, and throw 'em in! Lively, men, we have work to do!" cried Bill.

The men were preparing to dig the hole, when Bella interposing between some of the gang, who were about to lift the bodies, said:

"No! no! I'm against your half-way work of doin' things! When a body's buried, it should be where the waves can't wash it out. Father and I'll bury these poor fellows!"

"You're a little too soft, Bella," laughingly cried Black Horse Bill, "but that's mostly so with wimmen-folks! Let her have her way, men," he added, and he was rewarded by a grateful smile from the girl who was to be his wife. "Come, boys, every one of you; we must lose no time in strippin' the merchant-man. You'll find us there, when you git through," he added to Bella and her father.

"All right," said Bella, "and now I'll dig the grave myself."

As the gang walked away, she picked up the spade one of them had dropped and went to work.

"Your chicken-heartedness will be the ruin of you, yet," said her father. "What put this into yer head?"

"You know what I've always said," she replied, "that them that's carelessly buried is apt to 'pear before us, after!"

The old man shrugged his shoulders, and shud-

dered, for he, like all his rude friends, the wreckers, was superstitious."

"I'll have nothin' to do with it," he said. "When you git through, yer'll find me with Bill."

The moment he and the wreckers were out of sight in the darkness, Bella blew out the lantern.

"You can rise, now!" she said, to the boys, who sprung up, unharmed!

"How did you manage things so well?" inquired Frank.

"Easy. I took the bullets out of the pistols of them that I knowed was goin' to fire at you. I told you to drop when they fired, for I knowed that would make 'em think they'd shot you dead!"

"The plan has worked well. We have to thank you for saving our lives," said Jack.

"I don't want to see human life took. Now ther's plenty boats lyin' round near here. Git into one, and make off quick as you can, is my advice. The storm's over, and you have wind and sea in your favor!"

The boys were soon launching one of the boats lying on the beach. They sprung in as it floated, and using the oars, they made good progress.

An hour later, as they passed a projecting point, a wild scene broke upon their view.

Along the shores of a bay numerous lanterns were flashing, lighting up the dark hull and the jury masts of the merchant ship, Neptune.

Many of the wreckers were aboard with ropes and tackles, hoisting bales and boxes.

Some of the latter, with a rope attached, had been launched overboard, and were being towed ashore by Bill's huge black horse, upon which he was seated, urging the animal forward.

The muscular form of the wrecker chief, with his sou'-wester pushed back from his forehead, his drooping cape, and his huge sea boots, was thrown into bold relief by the lurid gleam.

The two boys sheered off, so as to avoid the bright stream of light thrown out upon the water, from the gangway.

There were about twenty men at work there, but the number was soon reduced to four by sixteen of them getting into a large boat, alongside, to arrange in it some boxes, which were about to be hauled ashore.

"Jack!" whispered Frank, "I have a plan."

He communicated it, but Jack shook his head.

"It may succeed, but I'm afraid not. However, I'm with you, if you are for trying it."

The boat was directed under the darkened side of the ship's counter.

The boys, while struggling to gain the beach, after the schooner grounded, had scratched their faces, which thus presented a grim, and rather bloody appearance.

Having tied a dangling rope to the boat's bow, they clambered to the rail, upon which they suddenly appeared, standing motionless, their eyes bulging from their heads with an assumed ghostly expression of horror!

The ship's lantern aft shed a lurid gleam upon their matted hair, and gave a livid hue to their faces.

The moment the four wreckers aboard beheld these two forms, which they had previously seen

drop dead (as they supposed) upon the sea-shore, a simultaneous cry of superstitious terror escaped them.

With one accord they ran to the gangway and sprung into the boat alongside, loosening the warp as they went.

Overjoyed at their success, the boys sprung to the deck. The ship's head, as she now lay, pointed seaward, her sails were loosened, and there was a good off-shore breeze. The lads, letting go the end of the cable, easily slipped it, for the craft at once gathered way.

Jack took the wheel, while Frank, lantern in hand, descended into the steerage.

There they found the captain and his daughter, together with such of the crew as had not been killed by the wreckers.

The joy of the prisoners may be imagined when they first saw the hatch unbolted and opened, and the well-known form of the young revenue officer.

The latter made a brief explanation.

"Then there's still work for us to do to escape the rascals," said the captain. "Thank fortune, they have not yet got at the silver bars."

All went on deck.

The sight of the ship receding at once showed the wreckers that they had been duped. Black Horse Bill was heard ashore ordering a pursuit and angrily cursing the men who had been frightened by the supposed ghostly vision.

Loaded as the boats were with bales and boxes, it was some minutes before they could be manned with their armed crews and started in chase.

By this time the ship was a mile off, and it was soon evident that in such a breeze she could not be overtaken.

"You have again saved us," said the captain, shaking hands with the boys. "We have now only to head up for Norfolk."

Before the morning of the next day they safely arrived there, and the Neptune was towed to one of the wharves.

Not far off lay a neat cutter, carrying seven guns. Her canvas was snugly furled, and her tall, tapering mast, well scraped and slushed, shone like silver.

The shrill pipe of a boatswain's whistle was presently heard, and a long boat, manned with fine, nimble fellows, pulled to the merchant craft.

In the stern-sheets was seated a good-looking elderly man, whom Frank at once recognized as his father.

Great was the latter's surprise and joy on boarding the ship to find there his son, whom he had vainly searched for since he was lost.

Frank explained, and Captain Watson seemed well pleased with the conduct of the two boys.

He stated that, having finished repairing the cutter, he had intended to sail on the following day for the wreckers' haunts.

"This brave friend of mine would like to go with us," said Frank, alluding to Jack.

"He is welcome," was the answer. "I shall be glad to have so gallant a recruit with me."

Accordingly, having bidden adieu to the merchant captain, who invited them to call and see him in New York, Jack departed with Frank for the cutter.

On arriving aboard, young Watson took his friend to mess with him in his own quarters—a little room adjoining the cabin.

Next morning away went the cutter, bowling out to sea before a spanking breeze.

In a few days she arrived off the shore where the wreckers' tents had been erected.

But not a single tent, nor any sign of a wrecker was now to be seen.

"They've been warned of our coming, and have skulked off," said Frank.

CHAPTER IX.

A SURPRISE.

"BOAT coming this way!" cried the lookout posted aloft, in the top.

In fact a sail-boat was noticed heading up for the cutter.

On its arriving alongside, its only occupant was seen to be an old, white-haired negro having fish to sell.

The captain bought some, and invited the man aboard.

He climbed up with difficulty, complaining of rheumatism.

"What part of this coast are you from?" queried the captain.

"Dis coast? Nary a part, massa," was the answer. "Dis nig am from Car'lina."

"There are no wreckers down your way, I suppose?"

"Not now, but dis chile hab seen 'em dar, once on a time. All go 'way, now, fudder norf."

"Yes, there were some here, off this very coast, a few days ago. You could not tell us where they have gone to?"

The negro rolled up the whites of his eyes, in a very peculiar manner.

"If I knowed it, wouldn't dare tell nuffin," he replied.

"We would reward you. Do you see that?"

And the captain displayed a bright, gold guinea.

The negro looked at the coin with longing eyes.

"Well, massa, I reckon if I can't take yer to de place where dem fellows hide, dat I can take yer widin a mile ob it, if you send boats' crews wid me."

The captain took Frank aside, and conversed with him in a low voice.

Then he said to the negro:

"These two boys will go with you, in your boat."

The man scratched his head.

"All right, sartin sah!" he said, after a moment's hesitation.

The fisher's boat, with Jack and Frank aboard, and the negro steering, was soon heading along the coast.

About five miles from the cutter was the end of the long point of land that projects into Currituck Inlet.

In the distance was seen another point. The negro headed for it, and the boat was now concealed by the land from the cutter.

As it neared the point Jack suddenly leaned over and whispered to Watson:

"The negro's blouse blew up a little just now and I saw the stock of a pistol. He is not *what he seems*. There is treachery!"

Frank appeared to take no notice of what Jack said, but the black watched the two closely.

Suddenly, drawing a pistol, Frank sprung toward him, but ere he could reach him something struck him on the head, laying him senseless in the bottom of the boat. The negro had hurled at him a slung-shot, which he had been holding, concealed under his sleeve.

"Ho, ho! you rascal! So you show your true colors!" cried Jack.

As he spoke he drew his pistol and took aim at the man's head. The latter had also drawn a pistol, and both fired at the same time.

Neither bullet took effect. The tilting of the boat, caused by the sudden movements of the two, had disturbed their aim.

Up rose the negro and threw himself upon the youth. The two clinched, and a struggle took place. The woolly wig dropped from the man's head, his false beard came off, and some of the black was rubbed from his cheeks.

Jack then saw enough to know that Black Horse Bill was his opponent. The great strength of the latter gave him a decided advantage.

After a brief contest he succeeded in getting Jack under him and in planting his knees upon his arms, while with one hand he pressed his throat. In his right he now held his long knife, and raising it, he was about to deal a sure, deadly blow, when Jack contrived to give him in the stomach a tremendous kick, which temporarily doubled him up against the boat-mast.

His weight against the light spar broke it in twain, and the wind blew it over upon him, the slatting mainsail partly wrapping him in its folds.

In an instant Jack had fastened a rope he had picked up about the legs of the outlaw, and secured the end to a thwart.

But Black Horse Bill, now getting his head clear of the canvas, again made a blow at his opponent with his knife. The boy dodged it, and using the boat-hook, dealt the outlaw on the head with it a stroke which stunned him. He then securely tied the wrecker's arms and ankles, after which he turned his attention to Frank, who still lay senseless in the boat. The slung-shot had struck his head slantingly and had only slightly broken the skin. By bathing his face and temples with water Jack soon brought him to. He then sculled the boat toward the cutter, which he reached just as the outlaw opened his eyes.

Great was the captain's surprise on learning that the supposed negro was Black Horse Bill in disguise.

The prisoner was shut up in the lower hold, while Frank went into the cabin, where the doctor attended to his injury, which he said was not a very serious one.

The cutter, with Jack acting as pilot, was then headed toward the inlet.

It was night, and the captain resolved to anchor off the point of the peninsula for the present.

Toward midnight the watch on deck were

startled by a gurgling sort of noise, seeming to proceed from below.

The carpenter was sent into the hold, which, to his surprise, he found deserted and filling with water.

Black Horse Bill was gone!

He had scuttled the cutter before he went!

But how had he escaped? Where did he get the auger he had used for boring a hole in the vessel's bottom? How had he taken off his irons?

These and other questions were heard, but could not be answered.

Soon after the carpenter had given information of his discovery, the boatswain piped sharply, and all hands were summoned on deck.

To save the cutter from going down Captain Watson headed her for the shore and beached her.

In this position she lay with her bow high and dry, partly buried in the sand, and her stern just raised above the water.

"The rascals may venture to attack us now, sir," said the first lieutenant.

"We will give them something hot to remember us by if they do," replied the captain.

Some of the carronades were brought up and placed in position so as to command all the approaches to the craft, and good lookouts were posted.

Cutlasses and pistols were also distributed among the men.

Morning came, but as yet no sign of the wreckers was seen.

Frank, who by this time had fully recovered from the effect of the slung-shot, was on deck with Jack.

The latter, mounting to the mast-head, fancied he saw the dark forms of men skulking behind a ridge of sand in the far distance, near the line of the pine forest.

He reported to the captain, who then selected from his crew about twenty hardy young fellows, well armed, to go and reconnoiter.

Frank Watson and Jack were put in charge of the detail, which soon started. On reaching the ridge of sand they saw no sign of the wreckers.

They entered the woods and kept on along a narrow path. Jack, meanwhile, pistol in hand, ran along on the right flank of the party, to act as a sort of scout. Suddenly, on rounding a small hillock, he found himself near the ruins of a stone house. The foundation and part of the walls of the building were still there. Evidently it had once been used as a store-house.

As he stood looking at it something struck him on the head from behind and he fell to the ground unconscious.

CHAPTER X.

A TRYING SITUATION.

WHEN Jack regained his senses, he found himself lying on some straw in a sort of dungeon.

A candle in a bottle threw a faint gleam around him.

Looking down upon him, stood Black Horse Bill.

A scornful smile curled the young outlaw's lip as Jack half rose and stared round him.

"You was outwitted at last. Few git the better of me. A nice trick you and your friend played me—pretendin' you was shot—that night!

Now I s'pose you wonder why I haven't killed yer, seein' as I have sech a good chance!"

And the outlaw pulled a pistol from his belt.

"It all seems like a dream," said Jack, still bewildered.

"The reason I've spared you is that I may have my revenge on yer for the games you've played me! Mere killin', 'thout anything else, is too good fer you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your father must die, and—"

"My father?" interrupted Jack. "Was he not then killed?"

"No."

"But I saw your men strike him down, and afterward rob him! I felt certain you had murdered him."

"No; I spared him because he promised to jine our band, and took a solemn oath to that effect. One of my men had sailed with him years ago, and it was through him that yer father wasn't choked off. He came to after he was knocked down. But yer father, while pretendin' to jine us, was detected in tryin' to steal off to the cutter. The cussed traitor must die for it, and you, his son, must be the one to send him to his doom!"

"Never!" retorted Jack, firmly.

"Yer won't—eh? We'll see!"

He motioned to a couple of men near him, one of whom then lighted a lantern, which threw a lurid glare about the cell, showing the form of a man suspended by a rope round his breast to a cross-piece above. The man hung directly over the opening of a deep, dark pit.

"That pit's thirty feet deep and there's water in the bottom. Them that falls into it never gits out again. It was once used for a well."

Jack uttered an exclamation on recognizing his father in the person hanging over the pit.

"Jack!" cried the captain, holding out his hand as his son advanced. "Glad enough I am to see you, but I'd rather it had not been here."

"P'raps not," interposed Black Horse Bill, grimly, "seein' as he's to be yer executioner."

"Fool!" returned Jack, indignantly, "do you then still think you can force me to kill my own father?"

"Cuss you, I insist on it!"

"You can keep on insisting, it will do you no good."

Bill made a motion to his men. Jack was then lashed to one of the poles to which the cross-piece had been attached, and a sharp knife was placed in his hand.

"Now, then, cut the rope yer father hangs to," commanded Bill, "so as to let him drop down into the pit!"

Jack's only response was to direct a scornful glance at the brute.

From a forge at one side of the cell, which in fact was his "blacksmith shop," Bill took a round bar of iron, heated red-hot on the end.

The heated end he thrust against Jack's naked shoulder.

The pain was excruciating—especially as the wrecker held the iron against the boy long enough for the scorched flesh to hiss and smoke; but, although Jack tightly compressed his lips, not a cry escaped him!

Bill withdrew the iron.

"What say? Will you cut the rope now?"

"No, not if you burn a thousand holes in my body!"

Bill went to the forge, and again heated the end of the bar.

He was advancing toward the pit, when a man hurriedly entered the cellar, and spoke to him in a low voice.

The next moment all heard the noise of pistol-shots, with other sounds of conflict above.

"Come, men, I s'pose we'll have to streak it!" cried Bill.

Followed by his companions, he ran to the other side of the room, and opening a heavy door, the wreckers disappeared from the gaze of Jack and his father, who could hear them bolt the door on the other side.

Meanwhile the noise above continued.

"This way! to the rescue!" shouted Jack, with all his might.

Then with the knife he severed the cords that held him to the post, after which he swung his father to his side, and loosened him from the rope by which he had hung.

Again and again the two shouted, but it was plain they were not heard. The sounds of the combat receded, and they judged that the wreckers had beaten a retreat.

"Is there no way we can get out of this hole?" said Jack to his father.

"Not unless we can break down that door," was the answer. "It opens upon an underground passage, leading into a gully, nearly filled with fragments of granite, which hide the outlet."

"Could we not burn it down? Here is a forge with hot coals in it."

"No, the smoke would smother us before we could make an opening."

Jack picked up the iron bar, and with this vainly tried to pry open the door.

"The wreckers will come back and carry out their purpose," said his father. "We must make up our minds for the worst."

Meanwhile, ignorant of the situation of his friend, Frank, with his party, was in pursuit of the wreckers, whom he had attacked.

Jack's long absence had alarmed him, and it was while searching for him that he had come upon some of the outlaws, crouching among the ruins of the old store-house.

These men, numbering about ten, fought with great courage, but, as shown, they were finally driven off. Frank pursued them for some distance, when he lost sight of them.

For hours he vainly continued the search for Jack.

At last he returned to the cutter, and reported to his father what had happened. He was very despondent at the loss of his friend, who, he doubted not, had been captured and killed by the wreckers.

"Did you search among the ruins?" inquired his father.

"Yes."

"Depend upon it, there is some secret rendezvous there, and there we must look for the gang."

"I think not, but I'm not sure, although we looked carefully."

"I will take some of the men, and go there," said his father.

In the afternoon he started with his lieutenant and more than half of the crew, well armed, leaving the rest, about forty men, under charge of his son—who, if anything should happen requiring the return of the others, was to hoist a red signal at the masthead, and also fire a gun.

The captain and his men had been gone about three hours, when the weather became so foggy that objects were not visible twenty feet from the cutter, on either side.

"No chance of showing the signal, even if we should have to, sir," remarked the purser to Frank.

"I trust we will not have need of it," said Frank.

"Something coming this way, sir," sung out one of the men on the lookout, about half an hour later.

"It sounds like a vessel of some kind," said Frank, as he sprung upon the bow.

Ten minutes after, the watchers saw a large, clumsy-looking canal-boat not twenty feet distant, drifting down toward the stranded cutter.

"There is no one aboard of her. She must have drifted loose from her fastenings," said the youth. "Stand by, some of you, to shove her off before she strikes our stern."

Men, with long oars and boat-hooks, stood ready as the scow approached.

As they were about to shove it off, the dark form of Black Horse Bill, sword in hand, bounded up through the open hatchway, and in a moment the deck of the boat was alive with strong, fierce-looking fellows, armed with pistols, cutlasses, and daggers!

"Now, men!" roared the wrecker chief in a voice of thunder. "Now, then, let 'em have it! Don't leave one of the cussed 'Revenues' alive!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE COMBAT.

THE sudden, unexpected appearance of the wreckers, rushing to the attack, headed by Black Horse Bill, gave the other party no time at present to use their carronade.

The sailors who had been about to shove off the canal-boat, were mowed down by the cutlasses of their opponents ere they could use their arms.

"A few more good blows, and the craft is ours!" shouted Bill, as the outlaws continued to pour in upon the cutter's deck.

Frank, although taken by surprise, behaved with his usual coolness and decision.

A few quick, brief words, brought to him all his men aboard, well armed, ready for the fray.

"Aim steady—aim for their eyeballs!" he shouted, as Bill and his gang advanced.

The roar of a volley was heard, and half a dozen of the wreckers went down!

A close, desperate combat followed.

Black Horse Bill fought with the fury of a

fiend, and, encouraged by his example, his men exerted themselves like tigers. Their number was double that of their opponents, but Frank exhorted his men with such spirit and fought so bravely in the thickest of the fray, that the young tars under his command not only kept the others at bay, but, handling their cutlasses with the practiced skill of man-o'-war's men, they laid many of the wreckers low. For some time the result of the combat seemed doubtful.

Black Horse Bill, enraged at the slow advantage gained by his party, made a dash for Frank Watson, with the intention of destroying this leading spirit of his adversaries.

The trained youth parried a sweeping blow from his cutlass, but he now found that he had to deal with one not unskilled in the use of this weapon, for an old man-o'-war's man, who had joined the wreckers, had taught him how to handle the blade with effect.

His great strength was useful to him. Several times Frank expected to see his sword cut in two by such anvil-like strokes. Watching his chance, he was about to deal his opponent an effective blow, when he was tripped up by a wounded wrecker, lying near him, in the gangway. He fell over the edge of the gangway into the water, and, as he went, one of the outlaws discharged a pistol at him.

The bullet just grazed his neck. As he rose to the surface, the man who had fired at him also fell over, mortally wounded by a thrust from a cutlass.

The dying wrecker clutched Frank and pulled him under the water with him.

Then, for some moments, a struggle took place there beneath the surface!

Frank still held on to his cutlass, and he made many efforts to reach his opponent with it, but the man had thrown his arms about him and got upon his back, as if determined to hold him down until he was suffocated!

At last the nearly exhausted youth contrived to partly dislodge the outlaw and hurl him from him.

As he rose, gasping, to the surface, he heard a cheer, saw some of his men in full retreat along the shore, and knew that the wreckers were victorious!

He had come up under the counter of the canal boat, where he was not noticed by those aboard the cutter, and it now occurred to him to conceal himself aboard the former vessel. He clambered, by a dangling rope, to her deck. She had drifted past the cutter, and would probably go ashore somewhere down the coast.

In the cabin he found an old iron cannonade, with plenty of ammunition, and he also saw a good stock of provisions on a shelf. At dark, the boat struck shallow water, when Frank at once waded to land, and started in search of his father's party.

The thick mist blending with the gloom, prevented his seeing objects ahead of him, so that, when at length he heard footsteps approaching, he paused and listened.

He soon recognized his father's voice, and hurried to meet him.

"So we have lost the cutter," were the captain's first words to his son.

"Yes, sir."

"I have heard all about it, for I have with me some of the men who escaped. I do not blame you; you did the best you could. It was my fault for leaving the vessel, and taking off with me so many of the crew. But we must try to regain possession of our craft."

"It will be difficult," remarked the first lieutenant. "They now have the use of seven good guns, and we have none. We have not even a boat."

"There is the canal-boat," said Frank, and he went on to explain.

"That boat may prove of great use to us," said his father. "We must try to get it afloat."

All were soon aboard the boat, and the captain then informed his son that he had been unable to find the wreckers' rendezvous.

"And you have seen nothing of Jack?"

"No."

"He is dead; he must have been killed before this," said Frank, sadly.

At the turn of the tide, the captain and his party succeeded in pushing the canal-boat into deep water.

"Now, if the tide would only take us toward the cutter, we might have her back, before morning," said the captain. "But, as the current sets a little seaward, I'm afraid we will not be carried in the right direction."

Such proved to be the case. At dawn they were almost out of sight of the cutter, but they now beheld a cheering spectacle.

To leeward of them, bowling along within a mile of the stranded craft, they saw a large sloop-of-war!

They endeavored to signal her by waving a kerchief on the end of a cutlass.

"They see us!" cried Frank, joyfully.

The vessel had backed her main-yard, the pipe of the boatswain's whistle was heard, and a boat was lowered. At the same time the sloop's colors went up at her gaff.

"The rascals!" cried Captain Watson, as the wreckers now hoisted the American flag at the cutter's gaff. "They mean to pretend that they are the lawful owners of the craft."

Through his telescope, which he had with him, he could make out the sloop's colors, which were Russian.

The boat which had been lowered was headed for the stranded vessel, instead of toward the canal-barge.

"They probably intend to come here, too, for they must have seen our signal," said Frank.

He was right. The Russians had seen the signal, and meant to go to the canal-boat, after visiting the cutter.

And this they would have done had not Black Horse Bill prevented it.

In the cabin he found one of the captain's uniform coats and naval caps.

As these fitted him he donned them, and thus attired he stood in the gangway ready to receive the Russian officer.

The latter, using broken English himself, was not capable of detecting any grammatical imperfection in the wrecker's speech.

Bill returned the officer's salutation, and then shook hands with him.

"You can see, sir, how we're situated," said Bill.

"Yez, zir. Bezzel go 'shore on veach—very bad. Ve vill help get ov."

"No, thank you. The cutter has bilged so that yer couldn't do us no good."

"Ve'll run in zome pord and zend you help vor repair."

"No—no, you needn't trouble yerself. There's help comin' to us to-day from Norfolk."

"Oh, very gook! Vod's that?" he added, pointing off toward the canal-boat. "They signal uz!"

"You're mistook," said Bill; "it's us—me and my crew—they signal to, and we're going, pretty soon, to send a boat. They're some of our men, whom we sent yesterday up the coast for a load of fresh provisions and other things, and they've been unable to make head against the tide, which has carried them out to sea."

"Oh, very vell. Good-day, zir."

Soon after, the Russian returned to his sloop, which squared away.

Black Horse Bill laughed long and loud at his success.

CHAPTER XII.

A DARING DEED.

WHEN they saw the sloop square away, the people aboard the canal-boat knew that the wrecker had deceived the Russian.

"Much better it would have been for us not to show ourselves at all," said the captain. "The villains now know we are here."

At about noon, Black Horse Bill, looking round at the guns, said to one of his men:

"These are nice guns—too nice to be idle. As I don't want to keep all of them revenue chaps' things, I reckon we'd better send back to 'em some of ther powder and shot."

The man laughed.

"Do yer think, Tom, you can hit the canal-boat at this distance?"

The boat now was about half a mile off—fast on a sand-bank.

The man addressed had been in the navy, and knew how to handle a gun. He was the same person who had interceded in behalf of Jack's father.

"I can try," he said; "but the ridge of sand is like a fort, partly hidin' the boat."

He sighted one of the carronades and fired. Some of the sand was seen to fly. Again he fired, but with no better result. At length the top of the sand-ridge being knocked away, the carronade began to take effect.

Crash! came a shot, scattering the splinters all about the persons on the deck of the barge as part of her side was shattered.

A cheer from the wreckers was borne to the ears of the party.

"The devils!" hissed the chagrined captain through his teeth. "We must try to mount the old gun we have here."

With a long strip of wood chipped from the edge of the canal-boat, Frank was busy putting up a signal-staff—a kerchief being attached to the end of the rude pole.

With the help of one of the men named Ben

Fraser, he was thrusting it into a crevice made in the deck, when bang! went the gun again. The man groaned and fell on his back. The shot had made a jagged hole through his groin.

"Poor Ben!" said Frank, stooping and raising his head.

The doctor who was with the party, poured a little brandy down the sufferer's throat.

"I s'pose I'm dyin', doctor," said Fraser.

"You can't live long, my man," was the reply—"not more than ten minutes."

"Then I'll make a clean breast of it. It was me that helped Black Horse Bill to escape that night aboard the cutter!"

"You?" cried Frank.

"Yes, sir. It was me helped him git off his irons, gave him an auger to scuttle the craft, and showed him the way to the port-hole. You didn't think when you shipped me at Norfolk, that I was in league with the wreckers!" he added, speaking to the captain.

"I never dreamed of it," was the answer. "Perhaps you can tell me where the wreckers secret rendezvous is?"

"I could, but I won't!"

"At least," said Frank, "tell me if you know what has become of my friend, Jack Reeves! Where is he, and is he living or dead?"

"I don't mind tellin' you all I know. Bill took him to his "Blacksmith's shop," under the ruins of the store-house. Whether he's still there, or whether he's livin' or dead, I can't say."

"You call it the "Blacksmith's shop," said Frank, looking puzzled.

"Yes, Bill is a good blacksmith. He has his shop under the ruins, where, when necessary, he repairs things like cutlasses, pikes, and sech plunder as wants repairin'. You can reach the place by an underground passage, leadin' from a gully, some yards beyond, full of the granite blocks which have been thrown there from the ruin. I'd be glad if yer saved Jack, for he wasn't a bad chap, and he did me some good turns, and—"

Death finished his further utterance.

The remains were soon after buried in the sand.

Meanwhile Black Horse Bill kept banging away, and the splinters from the canal-boat flew in every direction.

Night soon put an end to the firing.

"If we stay here," said Captain Watson, "we will be knocked to pieces to-morrow. As we have but one old gun, there appears to be no way that we can recapture the cutter. It would be a good thing if we could blow her up, so as to baulk those rascals!"

"I will try it," said Frank.

"No use; it could not be done," said his father.

At that moment the moon arose, and as Black Horse Bill could now dimly see the canal-boat, in the distance, he again commenced to fire upon her. In the faint light many of the shots were directed wide of the mark, but some of them struck the boat, and several of the men were killed.

Meanwhile, on the beach opposite to the boat, a large throng of armed fishermen and others, all friendly to, and in league with the wreckers,

had gathered, so that the retreat of the seamen was cut off in that direction.

At every shot that did mischief these people cheered their friends, and hooted at the imperiled man-o'-war's men.

Finally a drifting patch of mist hid both the canal-boat and the cutter from the gaze of these spectators.

Frank withdrew from his companions, and walked off to the edge of the bank, where he was concealed by the mist from their gaze.

Something dark floating past, had attracted his attention. He could not see it plainly, and thinking it was an empty boat, he resolved to secure it. Putting his pistol in his cap to keep it dry, he swam out toward the object, which, however, was carried so fast by the current that he was ten fathoms from the bank ere he reached it. He then discovered that it was a fragment of the canal-boat, about eight feet square, with a part of the rail on one side of it and a heavy beam on the other, which kept it evenly balanced.

As Frank could not swim back to the bank against the strong tide, he got upon the raft, and knowing he could not work this clumsy object back to the place he had left, he crouched behind the rail, and there remained, to be borne swiftly on. All at once he saw the stern of the cutter looming before him in the mist, and the thought now flashed upon him, that he might find a chance to blow up the vessel! The current would carry him past the stern, and, for an instant, Frank feared that he would be unable to get aboard. But, reaching over, he contrived to seize a dangling rope.

He drew the fragment under the cabin windows, and, rising, peered into the cabin.

This was lighted by a single lamp, which showed him that no one was there. As all the men were forward and in the gangway, there was no danger of his being seen from above.

Cautiously opening the window, the boy crept into the cabin.

He knew the cutter so well that he had no trouble in finding the powder magazine.

The door leading to it from the cabin was open, and Frank heard voices which indicated that some of the outlaws were there after a supply of ammunition. He got behind the door and waited for them to come out.

At length three men emerged, carrying powder and shot.

"Shut the door!" said one, and Frank held his pistol ready, expecting to be discovered.

He was greatly relieved, when one of the wreckers said: "Never mind the door. We'll want to come down here again soon."

The three moved on. As soon as the boy heard them go on deck, he glided into the powder-room.

Taking a paper from his pocket, he prepared a wisp, cut an incision through the bung of one of the powder-kegs with his knife, inserted an end of the wisp, and lighted with a match the other extremity. The hissing wisp burned rapidly; at the same moment Frank heard some one enter the cabin behind him.

He turned, to confront Black Horse Bill!

For an instant, so great was the surprise of the latter, that he stood as if dumfounded.

The sight of the burning wisp showed him the cutter's danger.

"On deck, there!" he roared. "Jump for yer lives! Cutter's goin' to blow up!"

The wisp had already burned so low that with Frank barring the way, he could not have pulled it out in time to prevent the expected catastrophe—this he could perceive at a glance.

Frank pointed his pistol at the head of the wrecker, and pulled trigger, but the weapon did not go off.

"I could shoot yer down, if I wanted to, yer young rat, but, as yer've got into this hole, I prefer to have yer stay here!" cried Bill.

With a low laugh, he closed the door of the powder-room, and turned the key in the lock. Then he sprung through the cabin window, and swam to the beach, where he saw all the rest of his gang, who had heeded his warning, and were hurrying up the beach to get as far as possible from the vessel.

He had not taken ten steps, when a broad, bright flash lighted sea and sky, and, with a deafening crash, the doomed cutter blew up, sending her fragments flying in all directions.

"Ho! ho!" roared Black Horse Bill, as masses of wood and iron dropped around him. "Good-by, Mr. Frank Watson! I reckon yer revenue uniform is scorched a little by this time!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RESCUE.

WHEN Bill locked the door of the powder-room, Frank believed that his doom was sealed.

He knew the vessel must blow up in less than a minute. To withdraw the burning wisp was impossible, as the keg had slipped down beyond his reach.

Then he remembered that the bulkhead separating the small powder-room from the hold, was thin, and the planks loose.

He threw himself against it with all his might, a board gave way, and he rushed into the hold.

Thence he quickly ran on deck, and, unperceived by the fleeing wreckers, whose backs were now toward the craft, he dropped alongside.

As he went under water the vessel blew up; when he rose to the surface, he found himself close to a large fragment of the cutter's topmast, with the top attached.

He hung to it, screened by the top, and allowed the current to carry him on. At this time, as shown, the current was away from the sand-bank upon which the canal-boat was stranded.

Frank drifted on for about a mile, when he swam ashore.

He then made for the pine woods, and, creeping among some bushes, he sat down, much exhausted, to rest and reflect. He fell asleep while he was thinking, and did not awaken until some hours later.

The moon was shining from a clear sky. The boy climbed one of the pines, and looked if he could see the canal-boat.

Yes, there she was, and he could dimly discern the forms of the sailors near her.

The wreckers and their friends now number-

ing about a hundred, were strung along the beach, opposite.

The boy wondered what his father thought of the blowing up of the cutter. Having probably ere this missed his son, he must suspect that it was Frank who had done the deed.

The youth regretted the anxiety his parent would feel on his account, but he hoped he might be able to relieve his mind in some way, before long.

Then he thought of his friend, Jack Reeves, and as there was no way he could at present return to the canal-boat, he resolved to seek the "blacksmith's shop," as Fraser had called it, and try to free the prisoner, if he was there alive. Having previously noticed the gully full of stones, Frank was not long in finding it.

He searched, but he could not find the outlet of which Fraser had spoken. He was away down under the masses of granite, which were so piled as to leave large hollow spaces among them, when he heard, above him, the sound of voices, one of which he recognized as that of Black Horse Bill.

"Yer better stay here—both of you," he said. "There may be no danger, but it's best to keep a lookout. I'll be back in the morning, and then father and son's got to die in the way I want 'em to, if I have to burn a hundred holes in that cussed boy's body with the red-hot iron!"

This remark puzzled Frank, but he knew that some fearful torture was to be inflicted on his friend. He continued the search for the entrance to the passage, and at last he found it. Moving along in the gloom, he came to the heavy door, which he found barred and bolted. He opened the door, and entering the "blacksmith's shop," he confronted Jack and his father.

"Frank," cried the former, joyfully. "The two shook hands cordially, and explanations were made on both sides.

"There are three of us, now," said Jack's father. "We ought to be able to overpower the two men on guard, even though they are armed, if we work right. My son and I will each take an iron bar, and Mr. Watson has his dagger. If we can only reach Norfolk, we can bring assistance to the cutter's people."

The three left the apartment, and were soon among the fragments in the gully. They heard the voices of the two lookouts, and thus obtained an idea of their position. Through an opening they saw the two men, who now stood with their backs toward them.

Jack and his father emerged, and dealt each of the men on the head a blow which laid him senseless.

The two had pistols and ammunition pouches of which Captain Reeves and his son took possession. Frank was then enabled to reload his own pistol, the previous contents of which had been damaged by water.

"Now, then," said Reeves, "we must get possession of the fishing-smack. The wreckers had one, and I know where to look for it. I don't believe there is a soul aboard."

He led the way to a small cove between the sandy headlands, where lay the smack in question, anchored with furled sails.

As the captain had predicted, there was no one aboard. The three got upon the deck, pulled up the anchor, and were soon under way.

The wreckers on the beach saw the craft as it stood out to sea before a spanking breeze, and their suspicions were evidently aroused, for shouts were heard, and some of them were seen making for their boats.

"We will run down toward the sand-bank, so as to let your father know that you are safe," said Mr. Reeves. "We can take him and some of his men aboard."

The draught of the smack was so light that it could have been laid close alongside the bank. As it tacked and headed that way, several boats, full of armed wreckers, were sent toward it from the beach. To avoid being captured, Watson was obliged to head seaward, and was prevented from reaching his father.

One of the boats sent had already got round beyond the craft, so as to intercept it.

Watson kept off, in this way hoping to pass it. But, by using their sail and oars, the wreckers got directly in the way of the smack. There were about twenty men, well armed.

As the vessel drew nearer they stood up, with Black Horse Bill in the stern sheets.

"Yer may as well heave to!" he shouted. "There's no use; we've got yer now! Stand ready, men, to board 'em!"

"We're lost!" said Captain Reeves to Watson. "That rascal, however, shall not live to boast of it!"

As he spoke he pointed his pistol at Black Horse Bill, whose form was plainly revealed in the moonlight, and fired.

The wreckers' leader stood unharmed. The unsteady motion of the smack had caused the captain to miss him.

"Keep her steady as she goes, Jack!" cried Watson to his friend, who was at the wheel.

He headed straight for the boat.

"Stand by for boarding!" roared Bill.

The smack, before a fresh breeze, was approaching with great velocity.

"Have you any plan?" inquired Captain Reeves. "We are going right into their jaws; in fact, there is no other way."

"I have thought of something," said Frank.

He then went aft and spoke to Jack in a low voice. Then he seized a rope and made a noose at the end. This done, he crouched in the bow, holding the coil of rope ready.

The smack, running on, was within a fathom of the boat, when Jack suddenly luffed, thus heading a little away from it.

"No yer don't!" roared Black Horse Bill. "Pull ahead, men!"

The crew obeyed, and in a minute the boat would have shot alongside. Now, however, Jack again kept off, and at the same moment the line flew whizzing from Frank's hand.

The boy hurled it with great dexterity, so that the noose caught about the top part of the wreckers' mast. With a sudden, quick, powerful jerk upon it, Frank brought it so far over that the gunwale went under, and as the smack dashed on, the boat being pulled down still further, was turned almost bottom up.

"Well done!" cried Captain Reeves in admiration. "I would never have thought of that."

The smack dashed on, and the trio aboard could see the wreckers, far astern, in the water, righting their boat.

"Now, ho! for Norfolk!" cried the captain.

"Yes," said Watson, "I hope we will have no more hindrances."

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

UNDER her broad mainsail and jib, the smack made good progress; but indications of a gale soon compelled the three to take in canvas.

Frank could no longer see the forms of the cutter's crew far away on the sand-bank.

His heart sunk a little. The wreckers numbered so many that he feared they might attack and massacre the whole party before he could bring assistance.

A fog was beginning to spread. In about an hour it was very thick.

Captain Reeves was on the lookout. He had resolved to be vigilant as it was now blowing a violent gale, and was very dark; but many hours loss of sleep had made him drowsy, and, ere he was aware of it, his eyes closed in slumber.

All at once he was awakened by a loud, hoarse cry.

A lurid gleam of light from a red lantern flashed athwart his vision. Not six fathoms ahead, were the lofty bows of a huge steamer, with a great red and yellow pipe, coming straight for the smack!

"Hard down! hard!" yelled the captain, springing to his feet.

But, ere Jack could obey, the heavy bow of the steamer struck the jib boom of the smack, crushing it like a pipe-stem. The next moment the little vessel would have been ridden down by the enormous steamer had not Jack, with Frank's assistance, worked the helm so quickly.

As the smack's head swung up, the steamer's sheering off, the huge craft just grazed the lee bow of the former.

The shock was sufficient to heel the vessel suddenly, and Captain Reeves losing his balance, fell headlong over the bow.

Both Frank and Jack had seen the latter's father fall. The huge steamer apparently passed over him, and the boys looked in vain for his reappearance.

The steamer, like an enormous specter rejoicing in the mischief it had done, swept on, out of sight, in the fog, but for some time after, the boys could hear shouts and confused voices aboard.

Jack stood like one dazed. To unexpectedly find his father alive, and then, after all, to lose him, was a severe trial—all the more so as he had thought he was safe, at last! He bowed his head, and was unable to stifle a few sobs.

"Such is life," said Watson, striving to console him. "Bear up, Jack! bear up!"

He wrung his friend's hand as he spoke, and Jack tried to cheer up as he again took the wheel when the mainsail was filled.

The little vessel dashed on, but now and then tears came to Jack's eyes as he thought of his parent's fate.

At dawn the weather was still foggy. The wind hauled ahead, and the boys were obliged

to tack now and then to hold their course. They found a barrel of sea-biscuits aboard the smack, and they made a light breakfast.

Toward night the fog cleared. Suddenly, just at dusk, Jack, who was now on the lookout, gave a shout:

"Lights off the lee bow!"

"It is Norfolk!" shouted Frank. "At last we have—"

He was interrupted by a loud, roaring, humming noise.

Before he and Jack could touch the mainsail, the little craft was struck by a squall.

Away went the mast, sail and all, with a crash, falling over the side.

The wind was from the westward, and the hulk was driven out to sea. The boys contrived to clear away the wreck of the mast.

Meanwhile, the lights of the city continued to recede, and at length they were out of sight in the rack.

"Too bad," cried Jack—"to think that, just as we got in sight of our port, we should be driven away from it!"

"That's so, and we cannot help ourselves, for we now have neither mast nor sail."

The two were nearly worn out with their hardships and the loss of sleep. At last, as the squall passed away to leeward, Frank lay down and obtained a few hours rest. Then Jack took his turn while his friend watched.

By this time the hulk had drifted some distance to the southward.

When morning came the coast line was barely visible.

"We are going with the gulf-stream," said Jack. "Unless we contrive to get ashore or sight some craft, we may at last fetch up among the Bahama Islands."

On the next day they found themselves off Roanoke Island, near the coast of North Carolina.

Finally they were enabled to wade to the island through shallow water. There were some fishing vessels there, but no craft to take them to Norfolk. The boys hired a fisher to row them to the North Carolina coast.

They made their way to a small village on the coast, and inquired at a tavern how they could reach Norfolk.

There was an old farmer by the door with a team of fine horses, hitched to a large, covered wagon.

"It's lucky I heered you," he said. "I'm goin' to Norfolk. It's a long route, and I'll be glad of yer company."

"Will you pass near the Virginia coast?" inquired Jack.

"Not very, yer kin bet! Ther's a bad set there, I've heerd, and I've no notion of fallin' into ther clutches. This is my first trip this way, and I don't want it to be my last, as it's profitable."

The boys then gave him a full account of their late adventures with the wreckers, etc.

"I'm afeared it'll be all up with yer father and his men afore yer can git assistance. It'll take three days, at least, for us to strike Norfolk, but it's yer only way. Ther's none of the people 'round here would help yer."

"I know it," said Frank. "I doubt not that

many of them would rather be friend, than attack the wreckers."

"I reckon you're 'bout right. Jump up, and we'll make a start."

The boys were soon in the wagon, and away it went.

During the first day many miles of a lonely forest road were traversed. At night the farmer pulled up in front of a tavern, back of which were a stable, a barn and other outhouses.

"Heer's where we are to put up," said the driver.

"We will sleep somewhere outside," said Jack. "We have no money."

"No, by Jerusalem! You shall have a supper and a good bed," said the other. "I insist on it. If yer feel squeamish about it, yer can pay me some other time, though I don't want any pay."

The boys entered the tavern, took supper and went to bed.

At about midnight, Frank was awakened by Jack.

"Hist! make no noise," he said. "It's as much as your life is worth!"

"What is the matter?" inquired Frank, in surprise.

"That farmer is a villain! He is in the employ of the wreckers, for whom he smuggles goods to Norfolk!"

"Hol hol!" ejaculated the young revenue officers. "But how do you know this?"

"Come here," said Jack.

He drew Frank to the window, which overlooked the back yard of the tavern, where lay the farmer's wagon, with its team attached.

To Frank's surprise, the first person he there beheld, distinctly revealed by the moonlight, was Black Horse Bill, mounted on his great coal-black steed, and directing the movements of half a dozen wreckers, who were transferring from another vehicle, some cases of stolen goods!

Near him stood the farmer, conversing with him, now and then in a low voice.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PURSUIT.

"WHO would have believed it?" said Frank. "I could almost have sworn that farmer was an honest man. Have you heard what they said?"

"I caught a few words, and I know your father and his men are still safe, for Bill spoke of them cussed revenues as having a position, from which with their gum, they could hold out for several days against more men than he could bring to attack them. It is likely the farmer has told them we are here. Our only course is to steal out, and try to glide off, unseen by the wreckers."

The boys examined their pistols to make sure they were in good order. Then they went to the door.

On trying to open it, they perceived that it had been locked on the outside!

"Trapped!" said Jack.

Frank looked around him. He pointed to a large bureau, which, it was evident, stood against another door.

The two cautiously moved this aside, to find a key in the lock of the door. They turned it and entered a sort of lumber-room.

It contained a window, which was found to face the side of the house. There was a high board fence below—too high to scale without a ladder.

"Hark!" said Jack, "I think I hear footsteps coming up the stairs!"

"We must lose no time," said Frank. His gaze fell upon a piece of rope, which was wound about some beams to keep them together. With Jack's assistance, he soon had the rope in hand. Then he raised the window, and while his friend locked the door, he fastened one end of the line to a heavy pile of lumber, and threw out the other.

The end of the rope dangled within a few feet of the ground, which the boys speedily reached by sliding down.

Above them they heard the noise made by the wreckers, banging against the door of the lumber-room.

The fugitives moved along in the shadow of the fence, vainly searching for a gate. Suddenly they heard the neighing of the farmer's horses, and looked to see the wagon guarded only by two men. Bill's black horse stood near it; its rider had evidently gone up-stairs with the other outlaws.

"Now," said Frank, "suppose we make a dash for that farmer's wagon, and drive off. There is the open gate, directly in front of the horses!"

"I'm with you!" said Jack promptly. Leaping out of the shadow of the fence and the shrubbery which grew near it, the boys rushed toward the wagon.

The wreckers saw them, and raised their pistols, but, ere they could fire, the sharp report of the boys' weapons rung out, and the two men fell wounded.

Before they could stagger to their feet, the lads were in the wagon.

Frank seized the reins, and Jack giving both horses a smart blow with the whip, started them.

Away they went at a swift pace, while the shouts of the wreckers were heard, far behind.

"They'll be after us, and as we are more heavily freighted than they, they may overtake us," said Frank. "Better reload the pistols, Jack."

As previously stated, the friends had with them an ammunition pouch. Jack loaded the pistols and placed himself near the back of the wagon, whence he could obtain a view of the dimly lighted road, in the rear.

He could hear the clattering of horses' hoofs, and the rolling of wheels indicating that the wreckers were in pursuit.

He let down the back-board, and dumped into the road some bales of goods to lighten the wagon.

Frank urged the team on as fast as possible, but it was not long ere Black Horse Bill burst into view, mounted on his coal-black steed, not fifty yards behind!

"Hallo, there! stop, yer cussed young rats! Yer better stop, or it'll be the worse for you."

"It would be that in any case," shouted Jack.

As he spoke Bill extended his arm and then came the flash and report of his pistol.

The bullet would have struck the boy to the heart but for a bale of goods in front of him, which received the missile. He raised his own weapon and fired.

The black horse staggered and went down on its knees. Bill sprang off and tried to set it up, but the poor beast had received a death-shot, and it rolled over on its side, expiring.

Jack felt very sorry he had hit the horse instead of its rider.

The animal, lying in the road, delayed the pursuit, and the fugitives gained considerably.

At last Frank perceived another road ahead, branching off from the one he was pursuing.

Which should he take?

He did not know, but he finally decided to let the horses go their own way, hoping they would take the right direction.

They dashed on as they had been going, keeping the same road. This seemed to become a little narrower as they proceeded. All at once, on turning a bend in the road, Frank saw, not ten paces ahead of him, a group of trees, which seemed to obstruct the way.

He endeavored to stop the horses, but in vain. The report of his pistol had probably frightened them, and they fairly seemed to fly in their headlong career.

There was a rush, a splash, a sudden sinking of the wagon, as it slid onward a few yards, and then it stopped.

To their dismay the boys perceived that their vehicle was landed in a swamp.

"Confound our luck!" cried Jack. "It'll be all up with us now!"

"I think you are about right," said Frank. "We couldn't have got into worse quarters."

The horses floundered in the mire, making vain efforts to extricate themselves.

Down they sunk, until at length their heads went under, and after a few struggles they expired.

"I was never made for a driver, that's plain!" said Frank.

"No; you've spoiled our farmer's team for him."

"That isn't the worst of it. The outlaws will be sure to catch us now; but we'll make a fight for it first."

The wagon sunk to the tops of the wheels, but it went down no further.

"We have a fort here ready to hand," said Jack, pointing to the bales of goods.

"Yes; and the wreckers will have some trouble to get to us through the mire."

The boys arranged a couple of bales, so that they would partly cover their bodies, in the back of the wagon.

Behind these they awaited the approach of their pursuers.

The latter, all seated in their wagon, drawn by a pair of good horses, approached.

Among them, his form plainly revealed by a lantern in the vehicle, was the pretended farmer.

The wagon stopped within a few yards of the swamp.

The boys remained motionless, hidden by the bales.

"Hello!" cried Black Horse Bill. "We've got 'em now."

The farmer swore an ugly oath.

"The young devils have killed my horses!" he cried, furiously. "But where are the vipers? I don't see 'em!"

"Come, show yourselves!" cried Bill. "No use of your hidin'. We know you are there!"

Still the boys made no answer. They hoped that the wreckers would conclude they had been thrown out and had sunk in the swamp. In that case the party might be reduced in number by some of them going off to obtain ropes and other materials for getting the wagon out of the marsh.

But Bill was too cunning to have this done until he had made sure the fugitives were not there. He ordered one of the men to climb a pine that grew near the edge of the swamp, with one of its upper branches projecting over the vehicle.

The man in this way had a good view of the boys, and so reported to Bill.

"Down with the tree!" cried the latter. "It'll make a bridge for us to git to the youngsters."

An ax was taken from the wreckers' wagon, and one of them went to work at the tree.

"Now we must commence work," said Frank. He took aim and fired, shooting the man down.

At the same time Jack fired at Bill, but missed him.

The outlaw gritted his teeth in his rage.

"They have the best of us behind them cussed bales!" he cried. "Let each man take to a tree."

The wreckers, numbering eight in all, screened themselves behind the trees on each side of the road, and commenced to fire into the wagon.

Now and then, when any part of their foes was exposed to their view, the boys would return their shots, but in the faint light their aim was not good, and they finally stopped firing, not wishing to waste their small stock of ammunition.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BOYS' PERIL.

THE outlaws also stopped firing, and their voices were heard as if they were holding a consultation.

It was now a little past midnight. The moon being down, and the wreckers' lantern extinguished, the boys could not see their enemies. Finally they heard the wagon in which the gang had come moving rapidly away. A deep silence followed.

"Can it be they have gone?" said Frank.

"I don't think so. It's a trick to make us show ourselves."

About half an hour later, the two heard the wagon coming back.

The lantern was relighted soon after and the boys then beheld one of the bales of goods, to obtain which it was now plain the wagon had been sent off, close to the tree, which the wreckers had endeavored to cut down.

The sound of an ax indicated that one of the

outlaws, sheltered by the bale, was working at the tree.

"Hello, there!" cried Black Horse Bill to the boys. "I give yer your choice. Yer can either jump into the mire and sink there, or yer can wait for the tree to come down and crush you."

"The villain!" muttered Frank. "He is going to have the tree cut, so it will fall upon the wagon."

"Never mind," said Jack, "I don't think that game will work. If we look sharp, we can get out of the way of the tree. It will give the rascals a bridge to reach us, but only one at a time can come, and we have our pistols."

A few minutes later the crackling of the tree was heard as it slowly toppled over.

"Look out!" cried Jack.

The two friends watched the dark mass as it came down, and sprung aside just in time to avoid it.

It struck the wagon with a deafening crash, and crushed it.

On the back part, however, the boys found standing room, with one of the bales still upon it for a "breastwork."

"Now, then," roared Black Horse Bill, "make a rush, men, and capture the young lubbers!"

One of the men sprung upon the tree and others followed.

The boys waited until the foremost man was close to the wrecked wagon, when Jack fired, shooting him through the head.

He tumbled into the mire and sunk. Then Frank fired at the next man and wounded him in the leg, so that he was obliged to creep backward, thus hindering the others from advancing—causing them, in fact, to retreat, so as to make room for their wounded comrade.

Bill was enraged at the failure of his plan, but he had seen that the boys still had the advantage of the situation. The lantern was again extinguished, and again the voices of the outlaws were heard in the consultation.

At this time the lads had not another charge left for their pistols, and they expected every moment that the wreckers would again advance, in which case they would be easily captured.

So deep was the gloom, especially there, among the trees, where the boys stood, that they could hardly see each other as they conversed in whispers.

"What shall we do?" said Jack. "Can you think of anything? It seems to me that we are about done for now."

"I can think of nothing," said Frank.

All at once Jack whispered:

"I have thought of a plan. This tree which is cut down, partly rests against another. What is to prevent our crawling out on it and getting up in that other tree?"

"Capital!" said Frank. "In the darkness the wreckers will not see us."

The boys hastened to carry out their intention. They climbed the adjoining tree, and ensconced themselves among the thick branches.

A minute later there was a bright flash of light.

Black Horse Bill had set fire to a pine knot,

and he now hurled the blazing mass at the wagon, which was soon in flames.

The boys could not help laughing to themselves. Safely stationed in the tree, they saw the shooting flames, the rolling clouds of smoke, and heard the exulting shouts of the outlaws.

"Where are the cursed youngsters?" cried Bill. "I haven't seen 'em."

"It's likely they've preferred dropping into the swamp and bein' smothered to bein' burned to cinders," said the owner of the vehicle.

"Ay, but who saw 'em drop?" said Bill.

"We wouldn't be likely to see 'em," said the other. "Probably they dropped on t'other side of the wagon, where the smoke is the thickest, and that hid 'em from our sight."

This explanation was satisfactory. The outlaws concluded that the boys had sunk in the swamp. They knew their character well enough, by this time, to be aware that they would sooner perish in this way than surrender themselves to those who would inflict torture upon them.

The wagon soon was a mere heap of smoking cinders. That part of the cut tree which had lain over it, was also burned through.

From their position the boys finally saw the gang take their departure.

"They are gone," said Frank.

"Thank fortune—yes," replied Jack. "And we are safe."

"Not exactly; how are we now to reach the road, since the cut tree, which would have served us for a bridge, is burned through?"

"Sure enough. Well, we will wait until daylight, and then we may see some way out of our difficulty."

When morning came the boys could perceive their exact situation, which was even worse than they had thought, as they were further from the road than they had supposed was the case.

That part of the cut tree which was not burned, lay at least ten feet away from the foot of the pine they had climbed.

"Had we a rope we could manage," said Jack, "by lowering ourselves from near the end of one of the projecting branches."

Frank looked around him, but he saw nothing which would serve their purpose in place of a rope.

"Let us have our breakfast, at any rate," said Jack.

Both boys had filled their coat-pockets with sea biscuits, ere leaving the smack, and they now made a meal. Hours passed. It was not until near nightfall that they resolved to make a truly hazardous attempt to reach the uninjured part of the cut tree.

About twelve feet above the swamp, a branch projected from the tree on which they stood. Their plan now was to crawl to the end, and, hanging down by it, endeavor to swing themselves to the trunk of the fallen pine.

It would be a perilous trial, as the branch was slender and might break, landing them into the mire ere they could swing out far enough to drop upon the tree.

"I'll take the lead," cried Jack, and in spite

of Frank's remonstrances, he got out on the branch, and seized the end.

Down he went, the branch cracking ominously as it bent.

He now hung directly over the swamp, and endeavored to swing himself outward. This he succeeded in doing, and, at the same time, the branch broke!

He fell a distance of about five feet, plump into the mire.

His head went under, and Frank saw the hissing bubbles close over it.

Unable to "lift a finger" to help his friend, he gazed down at the fatal spot in despair.

Suddenly he gave a cry of joy. Jack had thrown out his arms, and contrived to clutch the end of the fallen tree.

The next moment he had drawn himself upon it!

As soon as he could regain his breath he burst out laughing.

"Frank," he cried, "I don't believe you know me. I wish you could toss me a looking-glass."

"It's no joking matter," said Frank. "I thought you were gone for good when you went under. Now, how am I to join you?"

"I'll fix that," said Jack. "Just wait a few minutes until I get back the whole of my breath."

Soon after, he crept along the tree to dry land, and entering the thicket on one side of the wood, he cut down, with his knife, a long, straight sapling. Having trimmed it off, he took it to the tree bridge, and passed the end of it to Frank. It was a good, hard pole, about fifteen feet long, hooked at the end.

"There you are," said Jack. "All you have to do is to hang that pole on one of the branches, and swing the other end to me. Then I will hold on to it while you descend."

The plan worked well. Jack held the pole steady, while Frank descended, hand over hand, to his side.

"Now for Norfolk, if we can find the way," said Jack.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MEETING.

THE boys finally reached the road which branched off from the one leading to the swamp.

Near this place was a clear stream of water, into which Jack at once plunged, and proceeded to wash the mud from his face and clothes.

They then kept on along the road. The weather was a little misty, and a fine rain was falling.

In the afternoon the boys halted in the woods, and made a frugal meal of their biscuits.

Tired and drowsy, they then looked for a sleeping-place, which they soon found in a hollow made by half a dozen large chopped logs, placed lengthways.

"There must be houses not far from here," said Frank. "These logs have the look of having been freshly cut."

The two crawled into the hollow, and fell asleep.

They were awakened by voices near them.

"What's all this?" whispered Jack to his friend.

"There they are—I can see them," was the answer—and as he spoke Frank pointed through the opening, on one side of the logs.

There, sure enough, Jack beheld four men, seated near a fire, not twenty yards off.

"Some of the wreckers!" he whispered.

"Yes," said Frank. "It seems as if, no matter where we go, we cannot shake those fellows off."

"If I don't mistake, they are of the same party who were lately with Black Horse Bill."

Such in fact was the case. From what the boys heard the men say as they conversed, it was evident that their wagon had broken down, and that Bill had ridden on with the horse, leaving them to 'foot' it.

"So we must have been going the wrong way," whispered Frank. "Instead of going toward Norfolk, we have been going from it!"

The fire the outlaws had made needed more fuel.

"There's a pile of logs," said one of the men, indicating those among which the boys were hidden.

To their dismay, the two friends then saw one of the party advance, ax in hand!

"The fellow is going to cut at the logs. He'll be sure to discover us! We cannot crawl out without being seen," said Jack.

"No, we will have to stay here."

Both boys drew their knives.

They remained silent while the man proceeded to cut at the top log.

The splinters flew. Soon the log was nearly cut in twain, and the discovery of the friends seemed inevitable.

Now the man paused to rest. He stood leaning on his ax, with his back toward the end of the hollow. In this position he was between the boys and his friends.

"This is our chance!" whispered Jack. "Come!"

He crept out of the other end of the hollow, followed by Frank. The two moved on, and soon reached a line of shrubbery, into which they crawled.

They were just in time to escape the notice of the wood-chopper, who turned and continued his work.

Two blows of his ax sent the split log rolling asunder! Had the boys been in the hollow they must have been seen.

They left the shrubbery, which now screened them from the gaze of the wreckers, and hurried on.

"Heaven only knows where we are going to, here in the dark," said Frank.

"They kept on, now striking a path, and now forcing their way with difficulty through the shrubbery.

"I think we'd better stop," said Jack, at last, as the woods became thinner and the soil more sandy. "I believe we are going where we do not want to—toward the sea-coast!"

"You are right," said Frank, as they halted. "Hark!"

The dull roaring of the ocean was audible in the distance, but the moon was obscured, and

the boys could see no water through the darkness.

"After all," said Jack, "we might as well keep on, and we may have the luck to find a boat. This confounded land cruising, with its woods, briers, and swamps, isn't at all to my liking."

"So say I," responded Frank. "Give me a boat and plenty of sea room!"

Walking steadily forward, keeping a sharp lookout as they went, the boys finally gained the beach, but they could not determine their locality.

Far out at sea they saw the light of some vessel, gleaming through the darkness.

They moved on, but paused suddenly as they observed a dark object approaching along shore.

"It is a boat with men in it!" said Frank. "We'll hide ourselves in this hollow in the sand until it goes by."

They crouched in the hollow which they had been about to pass. The boat was soon near enough for the boys to know that it contained wreckers.

They recognized the voice of Black Horse Bill.

The craft was pulled to the beach, a few yards below the spot where they had crouched.

"It's very strange they're not come yet," said Bill. "It's time they were heer."

"He means the men we saw in the woods," whispered Jack. "Probably the boat was to take them aboard at this point."

Bill stood looking round him.

"I'm certain I see'd two 'figgers' here," he said, "as we were comin' with the boat. What can have become of 'em?"

"Are you sure?" inquired one of the men.

"Yes. Come and help me look for 'em. They must be hiding somewhere, and, if things can't be right!"

"Confound his eyes," muttered Jack.

The three men in the boat got out, and with Bill they moved along, passing within a few feet of the boys' hiding-place.

"Now," whispered Frank. "Now, for the boat!"

Up jumped the lads, making a dash for the boat.

One of the men chancing to turn at that moment, saw them, and gave the alarm. As they shoved off the boat and sprung into it, Black Horse Bill and one of his companions fired at them.

The bullet whistled past their ears as they seized oars and pulled rapidly away in the darkness.

They were not six fathoms from the shore, when a huge stone, hurled by one of the wreckers, came crashing down upon the bottom of the boat, inside, cracking the planks so that the water entered. By the time the light craft was a hundred fathoms from land, she was half full of water.

"You'll have to scull the boat," said Jack, "while I bail."

Frank took his place astern, and worked the boat along; but, although Jack exerted himself manfully, the water kept coming in.

There was no way to stop the leak, as more than one plank was cracked.

"If we can keep afloat until I work the boat so as to intercept that vessel," said Frank, pointing to the distant light, "we will be safe enough!"

"But I don't think we can keep afloat so long," said Jack.

The wind was increasing, and the seas were becoming rougher every moment.

In order that Jack might rest a little, Frank exchanged places with him.

The water now came in so fast that it gained upon the bailer.

Meanwhile, the boat kept drawing nearer to the light.

All at once this disappeared!

"What does that mean?" inquired Jack.

"It means the 'rack' is become so thick in that direction that it hides the light!" cried Frank.

Taking turns, the boys continued to work the boat, until the latter could no longer be handled. It had filled, and the occupants were now obliged to jump out and turn it bottom up.

They then got astraddle of it. Peering through the mist and the darkness they suddenly heard the creaking of yards, the flapping of canvas, and the piping of a boatswain's whistle.

"Good! Here she is, close aboard of us!" cried Frank. "There's her light! I can see it now!"

The lurid gleam of a lantern right ahead burst to view through the dark, drifting mist.

"Ahoy, there! ship ahoy! Don't run us down!" shouted both boys at once.

But the craft came steadily on. The two could see her bows looming through the mist.

Again they shouted, and this time they knew they were heard.

The bows swung off, the canvas flapped, and they could distinctly hear the voice of the quartermaster:

"Port, there—port!"

Then the boatswain again piped, and the hoarse command of, "Third cutter away!" was heard.

A minute later the two saw a boat shooting toward them.

They were picked up and taken aboard the vessel, which proved to be the U. S. sloop-of-war Canton, Captain Barker.

When the boys had made explanations, the commander conducted them below to a berth, in which, to their surprise, they saw Jack's father, Captain Watson!

But he was delirious, and did not know his son.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONCLUSION.

"WHAT does this mean?" cried Jack. "We were sure he was lost!"

"The captain of the steamer from which he was transferred to this ship told me all he knew about the affair," said the commander.

The explanation was as follows:

It seemed that, instead of going overboard to the sea, as the boys had thought was the

case, when he fell from the fishing-smack on the night of the collision, the captain had dropped upon the huge sheet-anchor, hanging down from the steamer's bow. In the darkness, and also owing to the vessel's swinging off, he was not seen by the lads.

On his being helped up to the deck he fainted, and it was found that he had injured his head. The vessels were then too far apart for the crew to make known to Jack and Frank what had happened. In that gale the steamer could not be veered round, and she kept on her course. Two days later, the war-vessel, bound for New York, was fallen in with, and to this craft—Captain Reeves—in a delirious state, was transferred, and put under the care of a good doctor, who said he would recover in a week.

Jack was glad enough to hear this. As his father had from the first been unable to make any statement about the wreckers, the boys now gave a full account of their doings, and of the perilous situation of the lost cutter's crew, on which the captain promised to go to the latter's relief, and to capture the outlaws, if possible.

This vessel had not originally been built for a man-of-war. In fact, her general appearance but for her open ports, was that of a merchant-ship. She had been altered from a trading-vessel, and it only required the closing of her ports and a streak of white or red paint along each side to make her seem like a craft of that kind.

"We intend to lay off and on this coast until morning," said the captain to the boys, "and then we will make an attack on the wreckers and rescue your cutter's people."

"All the wreckers will escape you," said Frank. "At sight of a man-o'-war like yours, carrying twenty guns, they will vanish like smoke, and you'll not be able to find them."

"How, then, are they to be caught?"

"By strategy," said Frank.

The captain took the youth into his cabin, and they talked over the affair. The result was that the captain gave immediate orders for the closing of the ports, and for a streak of red paint to be laid along each side.

The weather was so thick and the vessel so far from land that neither the lights nor the men at work would be seen.

The numerous detail of fifty men set at this task were not long in finishing it.

Next morning the weather had cleared and the sun shone brightly upon the waters. Captain Barker was standing within two miles of the coast, and Frank, with a spy-glass, was by his side, scanning the shore.

"There they are!" he said, at last, pointing out the sand-bank, upon which lay the half-shattered canal-boat, with its occupants watching the approaching vessel. Others also watched her. Black Horse Bill and his followers, all hungry for this new prize, which they took for a merchant craft, stood upon the beach nearly ready to launch their boats and go out to capture her.

Frank and Jack could not help laughing to see the frantic signals the cutter's people were making to the supposed merchantmen for them to come no nearer!

They shouted, waved kerchiefs, and pointed toward the wreckers, shaking their heads to intimate the true character of the gang!

As if influenced by these signs, Captain Barker, when within a half a mile of the canal-boat, suddenly veered and headed his craft seaward!

This, however, brought his course toward a sand-bank, and he tacked to avoid it.

The wreckers, who had foreseen this movement, had all come out in their boats to intercept the vessel, and were now directly ahead!

"Heave to there!" roared Black Horse Bill, who stood in the stern of the head boat, "heave to! We want to come aboard!"

"What for?" inquired Captain Barker through his trumpet.

"Yer'll find out, if yer don't lay yer main yard aback!" answered the ruffian, leveling a pistol.

The captain, as if alarmed, immediately hove to.

The wreckers gave a yell of mingled exultation and derision.

They pulled vigorously, and the boats rapidly approached the merchantman.

"Hello! I say, what's yer cargo?" shouted Bill.

"Is that any of *your* business?" returned Captain Barker, scarcely able to suppress a smile.

"I jest reckon it is!" cried Bill, with a hoarse laugh. "You'll find that out 'fore long. Better answer, or it'll be the worse for yer!"

"Well, then, my principal cargo is too combustible to mention."

"What in thunder do yer mean by that?" cried Bill.

"You'll see when you come aboard!"

The boats now were within about twenty fathoms of the ship, and to windward of her.

"Come, tell me yer cargo, or I'll put a bullet through you!" continued Bill, savagely.

"Do you want to know?"

"Why, cuss you, yes—in quick time, too!"

The captain made a preconcerted signal, the boatswain piped, and every port-hole flying open, the grim muzzles of ten carronades were projected, to frown upon the wreckers' boats!

"This craft is the U. S. sloop-of-war Canton!" roared Captain Barker through his trumpet. "We have you under our guns, so that we can blow you to pieces in a moment, and we'll do it unless you and all your men come aboard and surrender!"

Black Horse Bill was astounded. He saw the trap in which he was caught and from which there was now no possible means of escape.

But he regained his self-possession in a moment, and a dark, desperate look flashed from his eyes.

"Good-by, men—good-by, all! I've led you out of many a tight corner, boys, but this one is too much for Black Horse Bill!"

So saying, and preferring the bullet to the hangman's rope, the ruffian pointed his pistol at his temple, and, firing, fell headlong into the sea, whence he was never seen to rise again—a shark having probably dragged the dead body down for its prey.

A few minutes later Captain Barker had all the wreckers aboard as prisoners in the hold.

after which boats were sent to the canal barge to take off the cutter's crew.

Great was Captain Watson's joy on finding his son Frank safe and well aboard the war vessel.

He stated that the latter had come just in time to save him and his crew, for the old gun aboard the barge with which they had hitherto defended themselves had exploded on the day before, and the wreckers had been preparing to come out to attack them! As the outlaws numbered almost a hundred, and Watson's force only thirty, it was reasonable to suppose that the former would have been successful.

Thus, through the agency of the two gallant boys, Frank Watson and Jack Reeves, the most savage band of wreckers that ever infested the American coast was broken up and its members eventually brought to the punishment they deserved. The death of their leader and the fate of his followers discouraged his numerous friends along the coast from taking up the same leader's occupation.

After the capture of the gang, the Cantor sailed for New York, where she arrived in due time.

About a week later, Jack's father was so far recovered from his injuries as to be able to accompany the boys on a visit to Captain Burton, of the ship Neptune, which the lads had so bravely rescued from the wreckers.

The captain received them cordially, and his daughter Mary blushed deeply when Frank took her proffered hand. The youth often visited her, afterward, and the result was that she finally became his wife.

The two boys remained steadfast friends, and never forgot their perilous adventures on the Virginia coast with BLACK HORSE BILL and his wreckers.

THE END.

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